

ISABEL ALLENDE EVALUNA



'A heartfelt novel, powerful enough to make a
dictator cry' - *Evening Standard*



“EVA LUNA”

Isabel Allende

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THE STORIES OF EVA LUNA

ISABEL ALLENDE

The king ordered his vizier to take him a virgin every night and when the night had gone he ordered that she be killed. So he was doing for three years and in the city there was no longer any maid who could serve for the assaults of this horseman. But the Vizier had a daughter of great beauty named Scheherazade ... and he was very eloquent and it was nice to hear her. (Arabian Nights)

PROLOUGE

You took off your waistband, you tore off your sandals, you pulled your wide skirt, cotton, to one corner, it seems to me, and you let go the knot that held your hair in a tail. You had bristling skin and you laughed. We were so close that we could not see each other, both absorbed in that urgent rite, wrapped in the heat and the smell we were doing together. I made my way through your ways, my hands on your rearing waist and yours impatient. You slipped, you went around me, you climbed me, you wrapped me with your invincible legs, you told me a thousand times they see my lips with mine. In the final instant we had a glimpse of complete solitude, each one lost in its burning abyss, but soon we rose from the other side of the fire to discover us embraced in the clutter of the cushions, under the white mosquito net. I pushed your hair back to look into your eyes. Sometimes you sat next to me, with your legs up and your silk shawl over one shoulder, in the silence of the night that was just beginning. So I remember you, calmly.

You think in words, for you language is an inexhaustible thread that you weave as if life were made in telling it. I think of frozen images in a photograph. However, this is not printed on a plate, it seems drawn to pen, it is a meticulous and perfect memory, of soft volumes and warm colors, Renaissance, like an intention captured on a grainy paper or a fabric. It is a prophetic moment, it is our whole existence, everything lived and what is to live, all the simultaneous epochs, without beginning or end. From a distance I look at that drawing, where I am also. I am a spectator and protagonist. I am in the shadows, veiled by the haze of a translucent curtain. I know it's me, but I'm also the one who observes from the outside. I know what the man feels painted on that rumpled bed, in a room of dark beams and cathedral ceilings, where the scene appears as the fragment of an ancient ceremony. I am there with you and also here, alone, in another time of consciousness. In the painting the couple rests after making love, the skin of both shines moist. The man has his eyes closed, one hand on his chest and the other on her thigh, in intimate complicity. For me that vision is recurrent and immutable, nothing changes, it is always the same placid smile of the man, the same languor of the woman, the same folds of the sheets and dark corners of the room, always the light of the lamp brushes the breasts and her cheekbones at the same angle and always the silk shawl and dark hair fall with equal delicacy.

Every time I think of you, this is how I see you, this is how we see ourselves, detained forever in that canvas, invulnerable to the deterioration of bad memory. I can recreate myself for a long time in that scene, until I feel that I enter the space of the painting and I am no longer the observer, but the man who lies next to that woman. Then the symmetrical stillness of the painting breaks and I hear our very close voices.

- Tell me a story - I tell you. -How do you want it? - Tell me a story that you have not told anyone.

ROLF CARLE

CONTENTS

<u>Prolouge</u>	4
<u>Two words</u>	6- 10
<u>Wicked Girl</u>	11- 16
<u>Clarisa</u>	17- 23
<u>Toad's Mouth</u>	24- 26
<u>The Gold of Tomas Vargas</u>	27-31
<u>If you Touched my Heart</u>	32-36
<u>Gift for a Sweetheart</u>	37-42
<u>Tosca</u>	43-48
<u>Wilimai</u>	49-52
<u>Ester Lucero</u>	53-61
<u>Simple Maria</u>	62-66
<u>Our Secret</u>	68- 68
<u>The Little Heidelberg</u>	69-71
<u>The Judge's Wife</u>	72-76
<u>The North Road</u>	77-82
<u>The Schoolteacher's Guest</u>	83-86
<u>The Proper Respect</u>	87-90
<u>Interminable Life</u>	91-96
<u>A Discreet Miracle</u>	97-103
<u>Revenge</u>	104-107
<u>Letters of Betrayed Love</u>	108-112
<u>Phantom Place</u>	113-120
<u>And of Clay we are Created</u>	121-126

TWO WORDS

She went by the name of Belisa Crepusculario, not because she had been baptized with that name or given it by her mother, but because she herself had searched until she found the poetry of "beauty" and "twilight" and cloaked herself in it. She made her living selling words. She journeyed through the country from the high cold mountains to the burning coasts, stopping at fairs and in markets where she set up four poles covered by a canvas awning under which she took refuge from the sun and rain to minister to her customers. She did not have to peddle her merchandise because from having wandered far and near, everyone knew who she was. Some people waited for her from one year to the next, and when she appeared in the village with her bundle beneath her arm, they would form a line in front of her stall. Her prices were fair. For five centavos she delivered verses from memory, for seven she improved the quality of dreams, for nine she wrote love letters, for twelve she invented insults for irreconcilable enemies. She also sold stories, not fantasies but long, true stories she recited at one telling, never skipping a word. This is how she carried news from one town to another. People paid her to add a line or two: our son was born, so-and-so died, our children got married, the crops burned in the field. Wherever she went a small crowd gathered around to listen as she began to speak, and that was how they learned about each other's' doings, about distant relatives, about what was going on in the civil war. To anyone who paid her fifty centavos in trade, she gave the gift of a secret word to drive away melancholy. It was not the same word for everyone, naturally, because that would have been collective deceit. Each person received his or her own word, with the assurance that no one else would use it that way in this universe or the Beyond.

Belisa Crepusculario had been born into a family so poor they did not even have names to give their children. She came into the world and grew up in an inhospitable land where some years the rains became avalanches of water that bore everything away before them and others when not a drop fell from the sky and the sun swelled to fill the horizon and the world became a desert. Until she was twelve, Belisa had no occupation or virtue other than having withstood hunger and the exhaustion of centuries. During one interminable drought, it fell to her to bury four younger brothers and sisters, when she realized that her turn was next, she decided to set out across the two plains in the direction of the sea, in hopes that she might trick death along the way. The land was eroded, split with deep cracks, strewn with rocks, fossils of trees and thorny bushes, and skeletons of animals bleached by the sun. From time to time she ran into families who, like her, were heading south, following the mirage of water. Some had begun the march carrying their belongings on their back or in small carts, but they could barely move their own bones, and after a while they had to abandon their possessions. They dragged themselves along painfully, their skin turned to lizard hide and their eyes burned by the reverberating glare. Belisa greeted them with a wave as she passed, but she did not stop, because she had no strength to waste in acts of compassion. Many people fell by the wayside, but she was so stubborn that she survived to cross through that hell and at long last reach the first trickles of water, fine, almost invisible threads that fed spindly vegetation and farther down widened into small streams and marshes.

Belisa Crepusculario saved her life and in the process accidentally discovered writing. In a village near the coast, the wind blew a page of newspaper at her feet. She picked up the brittle yellow paper and stood a long while looking at it, unable to determine its purpose, until curiosity overcame her shyness. She walked over to a man who was washing his horse in the muddy pool where she had quenched her thirst.

- "What is this?"- she asked. - "The sports page of the newspaper,"- the man replied, concealing his surprise at her ignorance.

The answer astounded the girl, but she did not want to seem rude, so she merely inquired about the significance of the fly tracks scattered across the page.

"Those are words, child. Here it says that Fulgencio Barba knocked out El Negro Tiznao in the third round."

That was the day Belisa Crepusculario found out that words make their way in the world without a master, and that anyone with a little cleverness can appropriate them and do business with them. She made a quick assessment of her situation and concluded that aside from becoming a prostitute or working as a servant in the kitchens of the rich there were few occupations she was qualified for. It seemed to her that selling words would be an honorable alternative. From that moment on, she worked at that profession, and was never tempted by any other. At the beginning, she offered her merchandise unaware that words could be written outside of newspapers. When she learned otherwise, she calculated the infinite possibilities of her trade and with her savings paid a priest twenty pesos to teach her to read and write, with her three remaining coins she bought a dictionary. She poured over it from A to Z and then threw it into the sea, because it was not her intention to defraud her customers with packaged words.

One August morning several years later, Belisa Crepusculario was sitting in her tent in the middle of a plaza, surrounded by the uproar of market day, selling legal arguments to an old man who had been trying for sixteen years to get his pension. Suddenly she heard yelling and thudding hoofbeats. She looked up from her writing and saw, first, a cloud of dust, and then a band of horsemen come galloping into the plaza. They were the Colonel's men, sent under orders of El Mulato, a giant known throughout the land for the speed of his knife and his loyalty to his chief. Both the Colonel and El Mulato had spent their lives fighting in the civil war, and their names were ineradicably linked to devastation and calamity. The rebels swept into town like a stampeding herd, wrapped in noise, bathed in sweat, and leaving a hurricane of fear in their trail. Chickens took wing, dogs ran for their lives, women and children scurried out of sight, until the only living soul left in the market was Belisa Crepusculario. She had never seen El Mulato and was surprised to see him walking toward her.

- "I'm looking for you,"- he shouted, pointing his coiled whip at her, even before the words were out, two men rushed her -- knocking over her canopy and shattering her inkwell -- bound her hand and foot, and threw her like a sea bag across the rump of El Mulato's mount. Then they thundered off toward the hills.

Hours later, just as Belisa Crepusculario was near death, her heart ground to sand by the pounding of the horse, they stopped, and four strong hands set her down. She tried to stand on her feet and hold her head high, but her strength failed her and she slumped to the ground, sinking into a confused dream. She awakened several hours later to the murmur of night in the camp, but before she had time to sort out the sounds, she opened her eyes and found herself staring into the impatient glare of El Mulato, kneeling beside her.

- "Well, woman, at last you've come to," -he said. To speed her to her senses, he tipped his canteen and offered her a sip of liquor laced with gunpowder.

She demanded to know the reason for such rough treatment, and El Mulato explained that the Colonel needed her services. He allowed her to splash water on her face, and then led her to the far end of the camp where the most feared man in all the land was lazing in a hammock strung between two trees. She could not see his face, because he lay in the deceptive shadow of the leaves and the indelible shadow of all his years as a bandit, but she imagined from the way his gigantic aide addressed him with such humility that he must have a very menacing expression.

She was surprised by the Colonel's voice, as soft and well-modulated as a professor's.

- "Are you the woman who sells words?" - he asked. - "At your service," - she stammered, peering into the dark and trying to see him better. The Colonel stood up, and turned straight toward her. She saw dark skin and the eyes of a ferocious puma, and she knew immediately that she was standing before the loneliest man in the world.

- "I want to be President," - he announced. The Colonel was weary of riding across that godforsaken land, waging useless wars and suffering defeats that no subterfuge could transform into victories. For years he had been sleeping in the open air, bitten by mosquitoes, eating iguanas and snake soup, but those minor inconveniences were not why he wanted to change his destiny. What truly troubled him was the terror he saw in people's eyes. He longed to ride into a town beneath a triumphal arch with bright flags and flowers everywhere, he wanted to be cheered, and be given newly laid eggs and freshly baked bread. Men fled at the sight of him, children trembled, and women miscarried from fright, he had had enough, and so he had decided to become President. El Mulato had suggested that they ride to the capital, gallop up to the Palace, and take over the government, the way they had taken so many other things without anyone's permission. The Colonel, however, did not want to be just another tyrant, there had been enough of those before him and, besides, if he did that, he would never win people's hearts. It was his aspiration to win the popular vote in the December elections.

- "To do that, I have to talk like a candidate. Can you sell me the words for a speech?" - the Colonel asked Belisa Crepusculario. She had accepted many assignments, but none like this. She did not dare refuse, fearing that El Mulato would shoot her between the eyes, or worse still, that the Colonel would burst into tears. There was more to it than that, however, she felt the urge to help him because she felt a throbbing warmth beneath her skin, a powerful desire to touch that man, to fondle him, to clasp him in her arms.

All night and a good part of the following day, Belisa Crepusculario searched her repertory for words adequate for a presidential speech, closely watched by El Mulato, who could not take his eyes from her firm wanderer's legs and virginal breasts. She discarded harsh, cold words, words that were too flowery, words worn from abuse, words that offered improbable promises, untruthful and confusing words, until all she had left were words sure to touch the minds of men and women's intuition. Calling upon the knowledge she had purchased from the priest for twenty pesos, she wrote the speech on a sheet of paper and then signaled El Mulato to untie the rope that bound her ankles to a tree. He led her once more to the Colonel, and again she felt the throbbing anxiety that had seized her when she first saw him. She handed him the paper and waited while he looked at it, holding it gingerly between thumbs and fingertips.

- "What the shit does this say," - he asked finally. "Don't you know how to read?" "War's what I know," - he replied. She read the speech aloud. She read it three times, so her client could engrave it on his memory.

When she finished, she saw the emotion in the faces of the soldiers who had gathered round to listen, and saw that the Colonel's eyes glittered with enthusiasm, convinced that with those words the presidential chair would be his.

- "If after they've heard it three times, the boys are still standing there with their mouths hanging open, it must mean the thing's damn good, Colonel" - was El Mulato's approval. "All right, woman. How much do I owe you?" the leader asked.

- "One peso, Colonel." "That's not much," - he said, opening the pouch he wore at his belt, heavy with proceeds from the last foray.

- "The peso entitles you to a bonus. I'm going to give you two secret words," -said Belisa Crepusculario. "What for?" -She explained that for every fifty centavos a client paid, she gave him the gift of a word for his exclusive use. The Colonel shrugged. He had no interest at all in her offer, but he did not want to be impolite to someone who had served him so well. She walked slowly to the leather stool where he was sitting, and bent down to give him her gift. The man smelled the scent of a mountain cat issuing from the woman, a fiery heat radiating from her hips, he heard the terrible whisper of her hair, and a breath of sweet mint murmured into his ear the two secret words that were his alone.

- "They are yours, Colonel," she said as she stepped back. "You may use them as much as you please." El Mulato accompanied Belisa to the roadside, his eyes as entreating as a stray dog's, but when he reached out to touch her, he was stopped by an avalanche of words he had never heard before; believing them to be an irrevocable curse, the flame of his desire was extinguished.

During the months of September, October, and November the Colonel delivered his speech so many times that had it not been crafted from glowing and durable words it would have turned to ash as he spoke. He travelled up and down and across the country, riding into cities with a triumphal air, stopping in even the most forgotten villages where only the dump heap betrayed a human presence, to convince his fellow citizens to vote for him. While he spoke from a platform erected in the middle of the plaza, El Mulato and his men handed out sweets and painted his name on all the walls in gold frost. No one paid the least attention to those advertising ploys; they were dazzled by the clarity of the Colonel's proposals and the poetic lucidity of his arguments, infected by his powerful wish to right the wrongs of history, happy for the first time in their lives. When the Candidate had finished his speech, his soldiers would fire their pistols into the air and set off firecrackers, and when finally they rode off, they left behind a wake of hope that lingered for days on the air, like the splendid memory of a comet's tail. Soon the Colonel was the favorite. No one had ever witnessed such a phenomenon: a man who surfaced from the civil war, covered with scars and speaking like a professor, a man whose fame spread to every corner of the land and captured the nation's heart. The press focused their attention on him. Newspapermen came from far away to interview him and repeat his phrases, and the number of his followers and enemies continued to grow.

- "We're doing great, Colonel," -said El Mulato, after twelve successful weeks of campaigning. But the Candidate did not hear. He was repeating his secret words, as he did more and more obsessively. He said them when he was mellow with nostalgia; he murmured them in his sleep; he carried them with him on horseback; he thought them before delivering his famous speech; and he caught himself savoring them in his leisure time. And every time he thought of those two words, he thought of Belisa Crepusculario, and his senses were inflamed with the memory of her feral scent, her fiery heat, the whisper of her hair, and her sweet mint breath in his ear, until he began to go around like a sleepwalker, and his men realized that he might die before he ever sat in the presidential chair.

- "What's got hold of you, Colonel," - El Mulato asked so often that finally one day his chief broke down and told him the source of his befuddlement: those two words that were buried like two daggers in his gut.

- "Tell me what they are and maybe they'll lose their magic," - his faithful aide suggested.

- "I can't tell them, they're for me alone," -the Colonel replied. Saddened by watching his chief decline like a man with a death sentence on his head, El Mulato slung his rifle over his shoulder and set out to find Belisa Crepusculario. He followed her trail through all that vast country, until he found her in a village in the far south, sitting under her tent reciting her rosary of news. He planted himself, spraddle-legged, before her, weapon in hand.

- "You! You're coming with me," - he ordered. She had been waiting. She picked up her inkwell, folded the canvas of her small stall, arranged her shawl around her shoulders, and without a word took her place behind El Mulato's saddle. They did not exchange so much as a word in all the trip; El Mulato's desire for her had turned into rage, and only his fear of her tongue prevented his cutting her to shreds with his whip. Nor was he inclined to tell her that the Colonel was in a fog, and that a spell whispered into his ear had done what years of battle had not been able to do. Three days later they arrived at the encampment, and immediately, in view of all the troops, El Mulato led his prisoner before the Candidate.

- "I brought this witch here so you can give her back her words, Colonel," - El Mulato said, pointing the barrel of his rifle at the woman's head. - "And then she can give you back your manhood." - the Colonel and Belisa Crepusculario stared at each other, measuring one another from a distance. The men knew then that their leader would never undo the witchcraft of those accursed words, because the whole world could see the voracious-puma eyes soften as the woman walked to him and took his hand in hers.

WICKED GIRL

At the age of eleven, Elena Mejías was still a malnourished puppy, with the dull skin of lonely children, her mouth with some holes from a delayed dentition, mouse-colored hair and a visible skeleton that seemed too forceful for her size and threatened with getting out on the knees and on the elbows. Nothing in his appearance betrayed his torrid dreams or announced the passionate creature he really was. She passed unnoticed between the ordinary furniture and the faded draperies of her mother's boarding house. She was just a melancholy cat playing between the powdered geraniums and the big ferns in the patio or walking between the kitchen stove and the dining tables with dinner plates. Rarely did a client notice her and if she did, it was only to order her to spray the cockroach nests with insecticide or fill the bathroom tank, when the crispy pump casing refused to raise the water to the second floor. His mother, exhausted by the heat and the work of the house, had no mood for tenderness or time to observe her daughter, so she did not know when Elena began to change into a different being. During the first years of her life she had been a silent and shy girl, always entertained in mysterious games, who spoke alone in the corners and sucked her finger. His trips were only to school or to the market, he did not seem interested in the bustling flock of children of his age playing in the street.

The transformation of Elena Mejías coincided with the arrival of Juan José Bernal, the Nightingale, as he himself had nicknamed himself and as he announced a poster that nailed on the wall of his room. The pensioners were mostly students and employees of some obscure dependency on the public administration. Ladies and gentlemen of order, as his mother said, who boasted of not accepting anyone under his roof, only people of merit, with a known occupation, good habits, sufficient solvency to pay the month in advance and willingness to comply the rules of the pension, more similar to those of a seminar of cures than to those of a hotel. A widow has to take care of her reputation and make herself respected, I do not want my business to become a nest for vagabonds and perverts, the mother often repeated, so that no one, much less Elena, could forget it. One of the tasks of the girl was to watch the guests and keep her mother informed of any suspicious details. These spy works had accentuated the girl's disembodied condition, which vanished in the shadows of the rooms, existed in silence and appeared suddenly, as if it had just returned from an invisible dimension. Mother and daughter worked together in the multiple occupations of the pension, each immersed in their quiet routine, without the need to communicate. Actually they spoke little and when they did, in the free time of the siesta time, it was about the clients. Sometimes Elena tried to decorate the gray lives of those transient men and women, who passed by the house without leaving memories, attributing them some extraordinary event, painting them with colors with the gift of some clandestine love or some tragedy, but her mother had an accurate instinct to detect his fantasies. In the same way, he discovered if his daughter was hiding information from him. He had a relentless practicality and a very clear notion of what was happening under his roof, he knew exactly what each was doing at all hours of the day or night, how much sugar was left in the pantry, who the phone rang for or where they were left scissors. She had been a cheerful and even pretty woman, her rough dresses barely containing the impatience of a still young body, but she had been occupied for so many years with petty details that her freshness of spirit and taste for life had dried up. However, when Juan José Bernal arrived to request a room for rent, everything changed for her and also for Elena. The mother, seduced by the pretentious modulation of the Nightingale and the suggestion of celebrity exposed in the poster, contradicted her own rules and accepted him in the pension, even though he did not fit at all with his image of the ideal client. Bernal said he sang at night and therefore had to rest during the day, he had no occupation at the moment, so he could not pay the month in advance and he was very scrupulous with his eating and hygiene habits, he was vegetarian and I needed two showers daily. Surprised, Elena saw

her mother record the new guest without comment in the book and lead him to the room dragging her heavy suitcase with difficulty, while he carried the case with the guitar and the cardboard tube where he hoarded his poster. Covering herself against the wall, the girl followed them up the stairs and noticed the intense expression of the new guest at the sight of the calico apron attached to the wet buttocks of her mother's sweat. Upon entering the room Elena turned on the switch and the large blades of the ceiling fan began to whirl with a whistle of rusty iron.

From that moment they changed the routines of the house. There was more work, because Bernal slept at the hours when others had gone to their chores, occupied the bathroom for hours, consumed an overwhelming amount of rabbit food that had to be cooked separately, used the phone every time and plugged in the iron to go over his gallant shirts, without the owner of the pension claiming extraordinary payments. Elena was coming back from school with the nap sun, when the day languished under a terrible white light, but at that time he was still in the first dream. By order of his mother, he took off his shoes, so as not to violate the artificial repose in which the house seemed suspended. The girl realized that her mother changed day by day. The signs were noticeable to her from the beginning, long before the other inhabitants of the boarding house began to whisper behind her back. First it was the smell, a persistent aroma of flowers, that emanated from the woman and stayed floating in the ambience of the rooms through which she passed. Elena knew every corner of the house and her long habit of espionage allowed her to discover the bottle of perfume behind the packages of rice and jars of preserves in the pantry. Then he noticed the line of dark pencil on the eyelids, the touch of red on the lips, the new underwear, the immediate smile when Bernal finally came down at dusk, freshly bathed, with his hair still wet, and sat in the kitchen to devour their strange fakir stews. The mother sat in front and he told her episodes of his life as an artist, celebrating each of his own pranks with a strong laugh that was born in his belly.

The first few weeks Elena felt hatred for that man who occupied all the space of the house and all the attention of his mother. Her hair greased with glitter, her varnished nails, her mania of scratching her teeth with a stick, her pedantry and her impudence to be served, disgusted her. He wondered what his mother saw in him, he was just a small-time adventurer, a singer in miserable bars nobody had ever heard of, maybe a ruffian, as Miss Sofía had suggested in whispers, one of the oldest pensioners. But then, on a hot Sunday afternoon, when there was nothing to do and the hours seemed to stop between the walls of the house, Juan José Bernal appeared in the courtyard with his guitar, settled on a bench under the fig tree and began to press the ropes. The sound attracted all the guests, who went peering one by one, first with a certain shyness, without understanding very well the cause of all this noise, but then they excitedly took out the dining room chairs and settled around the Nightingale. The man had a vulgar voice, but it was sung and he sang with grace. I knew all the old boleros and the rancheras of Mexican repertoire and some guerrilla songs sown with profanity and blasphemy, which made the women blush. For the first time, since the girl could remember, there was a party atmosphere at the boarding house. When it got dark, they lit two paraffin lamps to hang them from the trees and brought beers and the bottle of rum reserved for curing colds. Elena served the glasses shaking, felt the words of spite of those songs and the cries of the guitar in every fiber of the body, like a fever. His mother followed the rhythm with one foot. Suddenly she got up, took her hands and the two began to dance, followed immediately by the others, including Miss Sofía, all squeamish and nervous laughter. For a long time, Elena moved following the rhythm of Bernal's voice, pressed against her mother's body, inhaling her new smell of flowers, totally happy. Soon, however, he noticed that he rejected her gently, separating her to remain alone. With her eyes closed and her head thrown back, the woman undulated like a sheet drying in the breeze. Elena retired and little by

little the others returned to their chairs, leaving the owner of the boarding house alone at the center of the patio, lost in her dance.

From that night Elena saw Bernal with new eyes. He forgot that he detested his glitter, his toothpick and his arrogance, and when he saw him pass by or heard him talking, he remembered the songs of that impromptu party and he could feel the burning in his skin and the confusion in his soul, a fever he did not know how to put in words. She watched him from a distance, sneaking away, and so she discovered what she had not known before, her shoulders, her wide and strong neck, the sensual curve of her thick lips, her perfect teeth, the elegance of her hands, long and thin. He had an unbearable desire to approach him to bury his face in his dark chest, hear the vibration of the air in his lungs and the noise of his heart, smell his scent, a smell that tasted dry and penetrating, like leather tanned or tobacco. She imagined herself playing with her hair, feeling the muscles of her back and legs, discovering the shape of her feet, turned into smoke to enter her throat and occupy it whole. But if the man looked up and met his, Elena ran to hide in the most secluded thicket of the courtyard, trembling. Bernal had taken over all his thoughts, the girl could no longer stand the immobility of time away from him. At school he moved like a nightmare, blind and deaf to everything but the inner images, where he saw only him.

-“What would I be doing at that moment?” Perhaps she slept face down on the bed with the blinds closed, her room in shadow, the hot air stirred by the fan's wings, a trail of sweat along her spine, her face sunk into the pillow. With the first blow of the exit bell, she would run to the house, praying that he had not yet woken up and she would get to wash and put on a clean dress and sit and wait for him in the kitchen, pretending to do her homework so that her mother would not overwhelm her with domestic chores. And then, when she heard him whistling out of the bathroom, she was dying of impatience and fear, certain that she would die of joy if he touched her or just spoke to her, eager for that to happen, but at the same time ready to disappear among the furniture. because he could not live without him, but neither could he resist his ardent presence. With dissimulation he followed him everywhere, he served him in every detail, he guessed his desires to offer him what he needed before he asked for it, but he always moved like a shadow, so as not to reveal his existence.

At night Elena could not sleep, because he was not at home. He left his hammock and left like a ghost to wander the first floor, gathering courage to finally enter the room of Bernal stealth. He closed the door behind him and opened the blind a little, so that the reflection of the street would come in to illuminate the ceremonies he had invented to seize the pieces of the soul of that man, who they were impregnating their objects. On the mirror moon, black and bright as a puddle of mud, it was observed at length, because there he had looked at himself and the traces of the two images could be confused in an embrace. She approached the glass with wide eyes, seeing herself with his eyes, kissing her own lips with a cold hard kiss, which she imagined warm, like a man's mouth. She felt the surface of the mirror against her chest and the tiny cherries of her breasts bristled, causing a dull pain that ran downward and settled at a precise point between her legs. I was looking for that pain again and again. From the closet he took a shirt and Bernal's boots and put them on. I took a few steps around the room very carefully, so as not to make noise. So dressed, she rummaged in her drawers, combed her comb, sucked on her toothbrush, licked her shaving cream, stroked her dirty clothes. Then, without knowing why she did so, she took off her shirt, boots and nightgown and lay naked on Bernal's bed, sucking greedily for her smell, invoking her warmth to envelop him. He touched his whole body, starting with the strange shape of his skull, the translucent cartilages of his ears, the sockets of his eyes, the cavity of his mouth, and so downwards, drawing the bones, the folds, the angles and the curves. of that insignificant totality that was she herself, wishing to be enormous, heavy and dense like a whale. I imagined that it was filling with a viscous and

sweet liquid like honey, that inflated and grew to the size of a huge doll, until filling the whole bed, the whole room, the whole house with its turgid body. Exhausted, sometimes she fell asleep for a few minutes, crying.

One Saturday morning Elena saw from the window Bernal approaching her mother from behind, when she was leaning in the trough washing clothes. The man put his hand on her waist and the woman did not move, as if the weight of that hand was part of her body. From a distance, Elena perceived the gesture of possession of him, the attitude of surrender of his mother, the intimacy of the two, that current that united them with a formidable secret. The girl felt that a sweat stroke bathed her whole, could not breathe, her heart was a scared bird between the ribs, her hands and feet itched, the blood pushing to burst her fingers. From that day he began to spy on his mother.

One by one he discovered the evidences sought, at first only glances, a too long greeting, a knowing smile, the suspicion that under the table their legs met and that they made up excuses to be alone. Finally one night, back from Bernal's room where she had performed her rites of love, she heard a rumor of subterranean waters coming from her mother's room and then realized that during all that time, while she believed that Bernal was earning her living with nightly songs, the man had been on the other side of the aisle, and while she kissed his memory in the mirror and breathed the traces of his passage on his sheets, he was with his mother. With the skill learned in so many years of becoming invisible, he went through the closed door and saw them given over to pleasure. The fringed screen of the lamp radiated a warm light, which revealed the lovers on the bed. His mother had transformed into a round creature, ros. Bermuda, groaning, opulent, an undulating sea anemone, pure tentacles and suckers, all mouth and hands and legs and holes, rolling and rolling adhered to Bernal's large body, who by contrast seemed rigid, clumsy, with spasmodic movements, a piece of wood shaken by an inexplicable wind. Until then the girl had not seen a naked man and the fundamental differences surprised her. The masculine nature seemed brutal and it took him a long time to overcome the terror and force himself to look. Soon, however, the fascination of the scene overcame her and she was able to observe with great attention, to learn from her mother the gestures they had achieved. take away Bernal, gestures more powerful than all her love, all her prayers, her dreams and her silent calls, all her magical ceremonies to summon him to her side. She was sure that those caresses and whispers contained the key to the secret and if she managed to seize them, Juan José Bernal would sleep with her in the hammock, which hung every night from two hooks in the closet room.

Elena spent the following days in twilight. He completely lost interest in his surroundings, including Bernal himself, who moved into a reserve compartment in his mind, and submerged himself in a fantastic reality that completely replaced the world of the living. He continued to comply with the routines by force of habit, but his soul was absent from everything he did. When his mother noticed his lack of appetite, he attributed it to the closeness of puberty, even though Elena was clearly too young, and took time to sit alone with her and update her on the joke of being born woman. The girl listened in tame silence to the rant about biblical curses and menstrual blood, convinced that it would never happen to her.

On Wednesday, Elena felt hungry for the first time in almost a week. He went into the pantry with a can opener and a spoon and devoured the contents of three jars of peas, then took off the red wax dress of a Dutch cheese and ate it like an apple. Then he ran to the patio and, bent in two, vomited a green hodgepodge on the geraniums. The pain of the belly and the sour taste in the mouth restored the sense of reality. That night she slept peacefully, wrapped in her hammock, sucking her finger like in the days of the crib. On Thursday, she woke up cheerfully, helped her mother prepare coffee for the pensioners and then had breakfast with her in the kitchen before going to class. At school, however, came complaining of

strong stomach cramps and both twisted and asked permission to go to the bathroom, that mid-morning the teacher authorized her to return home.

Elena took a long detour to avoid the streets of the neighborhood and approached the house by the back wall, which faced a ravine. He managed to climb the wall and jump into the yard with less risk than expected. He had calculated that at that time his mother was in the market, and since it was the day of fresh fish it would take a long time to return. In the house were only Juan José Bernal and Miss Sofía, who had not been to work for a week because she had an attack of arthritis.

Elena hid the books and shoes under blankets and slipped into the house. He climbed the ladder to the wall, holding his breath, until he heard the radio thundering in Miss Sophia's room and felt calmer. Bernal's door gave way immediately. It was dark inside and for a moment he saw nothing, because it came from the morning glow in the street, but he knew the room by heart, he had measured the space many times, he knew where each object was, in what precise place the floor creaked and how many steps from the door was the bed. In any case, he waited for the view to become accustomed to the gloom and for the contours of the furniture to appear. In a few moments he could also make out the man on the bed. He was not on his stomach, as he had imagined so many times, but on his back on the sheets, dressed only in a pair of underpants, one arm extended and the other on his chest, a lock of hair over his eyes. Elena felt that suddenly all the fear and impatience accumulated during those days disappeared completely, leaving her clean, with the tranquility of who knows what she should do. It seemed to him that he had lived that moment many times; I know there was nothing to fear, it was just a ceremony somewhat different from the previous ones. Slowly she took off her school uniform, but did not dare to let go of her cotton panties too. He approached the bed. I could see Bernal better. He sat on the edge, a little way from the man's hand, trying not to let his weight mark another fold in the sheets, he slowly bowed, until his face was a few inches away from him and he could feel the warmth of his breathing and the sweet smell of his body, and with infinite prudence he lay down beside her, stretching each leg carefully so as not to awaken him.

He waited, listening to the silence, until he decided to put his hand on his belly in an almost imperceptible caress. That contact caused a suffocating surge in his body, he thought that the noise of his heart rumbled throughout the house and would awaken the man. It took him several minutes to recover his understanding and when he checked that he did not move, he relaxed the tension and rested his hand with the full weight of his arm, which was so light anyway, that it did not alter Bernal's rest. Elena remembered the gestures she had seen her mother and while she was inserting her fingers under the elastic of her underpants, she looked for the man's mouth and kissed him as she had done so many times in front of the mirror. Bernal moaned still asleep and linked the girl by the waist with one arm, while his other hand caught hers to guide her and his mouth opened to return the kiss, whispering the name of the lover. Elena heard him call her mother, but instead of retiring she pressed closer to him. Bernal grabbed her by the waist and lifted her up, settling her on her body as she began the first movements of love. Just then, feeling the extreme fragility of that bird skeleton on his chest, a spark of consciousness crossed the cotton wool of sleep and the man opened his eyes. Elena felt his body tighten, he was caught by the ribs and rejected with such violence that he hit the ground, but stood up and returned to him to hug him again. Bernal hit her in the face and jumped out of bed, terrified who knows why old bans and nightmares.

- Perverse, perverse girl! -scream. The door opened and Miss Sofia appeared in the doorway.

Elena spent the next seven years in a boarding school for nuns, three more in a university in the capital and then went to work in a bank. Meanwhile, her mother married her lover and between them they continued to administer the pension, until they had enough savings to retire to a small country house,

where they grew carnations and chrysanthemums to sell in the city. The Nightingale placed his artist's poster in a golden frame, but did not return to sing in night shows and nobody missed him. He never accompanied his wife to visit the step daughter, nor did he ask about her, so as not to disturb the doubts of his own spirit, but he thought about her often. The image of the girl remained intact for him, the years did not touch her, she remained the lustful and defeated love creature whom he rejected. In truth, as the years went by, the memory of those light bones, of that infantile hand in her belly, of that baby tongue in her mouth, grew until it became an obsession. When he embraced his wife's heavy body, he had to concentrate on those visions, invoking Elena meticulously, to awaken the increasingly diffuse impulse of pleasure. In her maturity she went to the children's clothing stores and bought cotton panties to enjoy caressing and caressing. Then she was ashamed of those wild moments and burned her panties or buried them deep in the yard, in a futile attempt to forget them. He was fond of going around the schools and parks, to observe from afar the impubile girls, who returned him for a few moments too short the abyss of that unforgettable Thursday.

Elena was twenty-seven years old when she went to visit her mother's house for the first time, to introduce her boyfriend, an army captain who had been begging her for a century. She married him. On one of those fresh sunsets in November, the young men arrived, dressed in civilian clothes, so as not to appear too arrogant in military finery, and she laden with gifts. Bernal had waited for that visit with the anxiety of a teenager. She had looked in the mirror tirelessly, scrutinizing her own image, wondering if Elena would see the changes or if in her mind the Nightingale would have remained invulnerable to the wear of time. He had prepared for the meeting by choosing each word and imagining all the possible answers. The only thing that did not occur to him was that instead of the fiery creature for whom he had lived tormented, there would appear before his eyes a woman who was dull and shy. Bernal felt betrayed.

At dusk, when the euphoria of arrival and the mother and daughter had told each other the latest news, they took chairs to the patio to take advantage of the fresco. The air was charged with the smell of carnations. Bernal offered a drink of wine and Elena followed him to look for glasses. For a few minutes they were alone, face to face in the narrow kitchen. And then the man, who had waited so long for that opportunity, held the woman by the arm and told her that it had all been a terrible mistake, that he was asleep that morning and did not know what he did, that he never wanted to throw her I do not even call her that, to have compassion and forgive him, to see if he managed to recover his sanity, because in all those years the ardent desire for her had harassed him without rest, burning his blood and corrupting his spirit. Elena looked at him in amazement and did not know what to answer. What wicked girl did he talk to? For her childhood had been far behind and the pain of that first rejected love was blocked somewhere sealed from memory. He had no memory of that remote Thursday.

CLARISA

Clarisa was born when the electric light did not yet exist in the city, she saw on television the first astronaut levitating on the surface of the moon and she died of amazement when the Pope came to visit and was met by homosexuals disguised as nuns. He had spent his childhood among bushes of ferns and corridors lit by oil lamps. The days passed slowly at that time. Clarisa never adapted to the shocks of today's times, it always seemed to me that she was detained in the sepia-colored air of a portrait of another century. I suppose she once had a virginal waist, a graceful demeanor and a medallion profile, but when I met her she was already a rather bizarre old woman, with her shoulders raised like two soft humps and her noble head crowned by a sebaceous cyst, like a pigeon's egg, around which she rolled her white hair. He had a mischievous and deep look, capable of penetrating the most hidden evil and returning intact. In her many years of existence she achieved fame as a saint and after her death many have her photograph in a domestic altar, along with other venerable images, to ask her for help in minor difficulties, even though her miraculous prestige is not recognized by the Vatican and surely never will be, because the benefits granted by it are whimsical: it does not cure blind like Saint Lucia nor finds a husband for unmarried women like San Antonio, but they say that it helps to withstand the discomfort of drunkenness, stumbling of conscription and stalking of loneliness. His prodigies are humble and improbable, but as necessary as the spectacular wonders of the cathedral saints.

I met her in my adolescence, when I worked as a servant in the house of La Señora, a lady of the night, as Clarisa called those of that office. Even then it was almost pure spirit, always seemed to take off from the ground and fly out the window. She had the hands of a healer and those who could not afford a doctor or were disillusioned with traditional science waited for her to relieve their pains or console them for bad luck. My employer used to call her to apply her hands on her back. In passing, Clarisa delved into the soul of the Lady with the purpose of twisting her life and lead her through the ways of God, paths that the other had no greater urgency to travel, because that decision would have ruined his business. Clarisa gave him the healing heat of his palms for ten or fifteen minutes, depending on the intensity of the pain, and then accepted a fruit juice as a reward for his services. Sitting face to face in the kitchen, the two women chatted about the human and the divine, my patroness more than human and she more than divine, without betraying tolerance and the rigor of good manners. Then I changed jobs and lost sight of Clarisa until a couple of decades later, when we met again and we were able to reestablish friendship until today, without paying any attention to the various obstacles that came up, including the his death, which came to sow a certain disorder in good communication.

Even in times when old age prevented her from moving with the missionary enthusiasm of yesteryear, Clarisa preserved her perseverance to help her neighbor, sometimes even against the will of the beneficiaries, as was the case with the pimps from the Calle República, who they had to endure, submerged in the greatest mortification, the public harangues of that good lady in her unalterable desire to redeem them. Clarisa gave up everything she needed to give to the needy, she usually only had the clothes she was wearing and toward the end of her life it was difficult for her to find poorer people poorer than her. Charity became a back-and-forth path and one did not know who gave and who received.

He lived in a ramshackle three-story house, with some empty rooms and others rented as storage for a liquor store, so that an acid drunken pestilence contaminated the environment. She did not move from that house, inheritance from her parents, because it reminded her of her past history and because for

more than forty years her husband had been buried there in life, in a room at the back of the patio. The man was judge of a distant province, office that he exercised with dignity until the birth of his second son, when the disappointment snatched the interest to face his fate and took refuge as a mole in the malodorous adit of his room. He went out very rarely, like an elusive shadow, and only opened the door to take out the potty and pick up the food that his wife left him every day. He communicated with her through written notes with his perfect calligraphy and knocks on the door, two for himself and three for no. Through the walls of his room you could hear his asthmatic clearing and some buccaneer swear words that no one knew for sure who they were going to.

"Poor man, may God call him to his side as soon as possible and make him sing in a choir of angels,"- Clarisa sighed without surprise of irony; but the timely death of her husband was not one of the graces granted by Divine Providence, since it has survived until today, although it must be more than a hundred years old, unless it has died and the coughs and curses that are heard are only the echo of yesterday.

Clarisa married him because he was the first to ask for it and it seemed to his parents that a judge was the best possible match. She left the sober welfare of the paternal home and accommodated herself to the greed and vulgarity of her husband without pretending a better fortune. The only time she heard a nostalgic comment for the refinements of the past was about a grand piano with which she delighted as a child. This way we found out about her love of music and much later, when she was already an old woman, a group of friends gave her a modest piano. By then she had spent almost sixty years without seeing a keyboard up close, but she sat on the stool and played a Chopin nocturne by heart and without hesitation.

A couple of years after the wedding with the judge, an albino daughter was born, who just started walking accompanied her mother to church. The little girl was dazzled in such a way by the tinsel of the liturgy, that she began to tear off the curtains to dress as a bishop and soon the only game that interested her was to imitate the gestures of the mass and sing chants in a Latin of her invention. She was retarded without remedy, only pronounced words in an unknown language, drooling without ceasing and suffered uncontrollable attacks of evil, during which they had to tie her like a fair animal to avoid chewing furniture and attacking people. With puberty he calmed down and helped his mother in the housework. The second son came into the world with a sweet Asian face, devoid of curiosity, and the only skill he managed to acquire was to balance himself on a bicycle, but it did not help him much because his mother never dared to let him leave the house. He spent his life pedaling in the yard on a bicycle with no wheels fixed on a lectern.

The abnormality of her children did not affect the solid optimism of Clarisa, who considered them pure souls, immune to evil, and related to them only in terms of affection. Her biggest concern was to preserve them uncontaminated by earthly suffering, she often wondered who would take care of them when she was missing. The father, on the other hand, never spoke of them, clung to the pretext of the retarded children to plunge into embarrassment, abandon their work, their friends and even the fresh air and bury themselves in their room, busy copying with the patience of a monk medieval newspapers in a notary notebook. In the meantime, the woman spent the last penny of his dowry and inheritance and then worked in all kinds of small trades to support the family. His own hardships did not take her away from the hardships of others and even in the most difficult periods of her existence she did not postpone her labors of mercy.

Clarisa had a limited understanding of human weaknesses. One night, when she was an old woman with white hair, she was sewing in her room when she heard unusual sounds in the house. He got

up to find out what it was, but he could not get out, because at the door he stumbled head-on with a man who put a knife to his neck.

- "Silence, bitch, or I'll dispatch you from a single court," -he threatened.

- "It's not here, son." The ladies of the night are on the other side of the street, where they have the music. - "Don't mock you, this is an assault. -As you say? Clarisa smiled incredulously. And what are you going to steal from me? Sit on that chair, I'm going to tie you up.

- "Not at all, son, I can be your mother, do not disrespect me."

- "Sit down!" -Don't scream, because you're going to scare my husband, who is in delicate health.

And save the knife, you can hurt someone," Clarisa said. "Look, ma'am, I came to steal," the assailant puzzled. -No, this is not a robbery. I'm not going to let you commit a sin. I'll give you some money of my own free will. You're not taking it from me, I'm giving it to you, is that clear? He went to his wallet and took out what was left for the rest of the seinana. I have no more We are a pretty poor family, as you see. Come with me to the kitchen, I'll put the teapot.

The man put his knife away and followed it with the bills in his hand. Clarisa prepared tea for both, served the last remaining cookies and invited him to sit in the living room.

- "Where did you get the strange idea of stealing this poor old woman?" The thief told him that he had observed her for days, he knew that she lived alone and he thought that there would be something to take away in that house. That was the first assault, he said, had four children, was out of work and could not get home empty-handed again. She made him see that the risk was too great, not only could they take him prisoner, but he could be condemned to hell, although in truth she doubted that God would punish him with such rigor, at most he would end up in purgatory, as long as I regretted it and did not do it again, of course. He offered to add him to the list of his proteges and promised that he would not accuse the authorities. They said goodbye with a couple of kisses on the cheeks. In the next ten years, until Clarisa's death, the man sent her a small gift by mail each Christmas.

Not all of Clarisa's relationships were of that ilk, she also knew prestigious people, high-ranking ladies, rich merchants, bankers, and public men, whom she looked for help for her neighbor, without stopping to speculate how it would be received. One day he appeared in the office of deputy Diego Cienfuegos, known for his incendiary speeches and for being one of the few incorruptible politicians in the country, which did not prevent him from becoming a minister and ending up in the history books as the intellectual father of a certain treaty of peace. At that time, Clarisa was young and somewhat shy, but she already had the same tremendous determination that characterized her in her old age. He came to the deputy to ask him to use his influence to get a modern refrigerator to the Teresian Mothers. The man looked at her, stunned, not understanding the reasons why he should help his ideological enemies.

- "Because in the dining room of the nuns one hundred children are free for lunch each day, and almost all of them are children of the communists and evangelicals who vote for you" -replied meekly Clarisa.

Thus was born between them a discreet friendship that would cost many desvelos and favors to the politician. With the same irrefutable logic he obtained from the Jesuits school scholarships for atheist boys, from the Catholic Ladies Action clothes used for the prostitutes of his neighborhood, from the German Institute music instruments for a Hebrew choir, from the owners of vineyards funds for the programs of alcoholics. Neither the husband buried in the mausoleum of his room, nor the exhausting hours of daily work, prevented Clarisa from becoming pregnant once more. The midwife warned her that

she would probably give birth to another abnormal one, but she reassured her with the argument that God maintains a certain balance in the universe, and as he creates some crooked things, he also creates other rights, for every virtue there is a sin, for every joy a misfortune, for every evil a good and so, in the eternal turning of the wheel of life everything is compensated through the centuries. The pendulum comes and goes with inexorable precision, she said.

Clarisa passed unhurriedly the time of her pregnancy and gave birth to a third child. The birth occurred at home, helped by the midwife and enlivened by the company of the retarded creatures, harmless and smiling beings who spent hours entertained in their games, one mumbling gibberish in his bishop suit and the other pedaling to nowhere on a stationary bicycle. On this occasion, the balance moved in the right direction to preserve the harmony of Creation and a strong boy with wise eyes and firm hands was born, which the mother put to her breast, grateful. Fourteen months later, Clarisa gave birth to another son with the characteristics of the previous one.

- "These will grow up healthy to help me take care of the first two," - she decided, true to her compensation theory, and that's the way it was, because the younger children were entitled as two reeds and well-endowed for goodness.

Somehow Clarissa managed to keep the four children without the help of her husband and without losing her pride as a great lady soliciting charity for herself. Few found out about their financial troubles. With the same tenacity with which he spent the nights awake making rag dolls, wedding cakes to sell, he battled against the deterioration of his house, whose walls began to sweat a greenish vapor, and instilled in his younger sons his principles of good humor and generosity with such a splendid effect that in the following decades they were always together with her bearing the burden of her older brothers, until one day they were trapped in the bathroom and a gas leak moved them peacefully to another world.

The arrival of the Pope occurred when Clarisa was not yet eighty years old, although it was not easy to calculate her exact age, because it was increased by coquettishness, nothing more than to hear how well the eighty-five he proclaimed was preserved. He had plenty of courage, but his body failed, he found it difficult to walk, he became disoriented in the streets, he had no appetite and he ended up feeding on flowers and honey. The spirit was detached to the same extent that his wings germinated, but the preparations for the papal visit returned the enthusiasm for earthly adventures. He did not accept to see the show on television, because he felt a deep distrust for that device. She was convinced that even the astronaut on the moon was a hoax filmed in a Hollywood studio, just as they deceived with those stories in which the protagonists loved each other or died of lies and a week later reappeared with their same faces, suffering others Destinations. Clarisa wanted to see the Pontiff with his own eyes, so that they would not show an actor with episcopal paraments on the screen, so I had to accompany her to cheer him on his way through the streets. After a couple of hours defending ourselves from the crowd of believers and sellers of candles, printed shirts, polychromies and plastic saints, we glimpse the Holy Father, magnificent inside a portable glass case, like a white porpoise in his aquarium. Clarissa fell to her knees, about to be crushed by the fans and by the escort guards. At that moment, just when we had the Pope within a stone's throw, a column of men dressed as nuns, with their faces painted, raised a banner in favor of abortion, divorce, sodomy and the right of women emerged from a side street. to exercise the priesthood. Clarisa fumbled in her purse with trembling hand, found her glasses and put them on to make sure it was not a hallucination.

- "Let's go, daughter. I've seen too much already," she said, pale. I was so distraught that, to distract her, I offered to buy her a hair from the Pope, but she did not want it, because there was no

guarantee of its authenticity. The number of hair relics offered by the merchants was such that it was enough to fill a pair of mattresses, according to a socialist newspaper.

- "I'm very old and I do not understand the world anymore, daughter. It is best to go home." He arrived at his dilapidated mansion, with the sound of bells and cheers still rumbling in his temples. I went to the kitchen to prepare a soup for the judge and to heat water to give her an infusion of chamomile, to see if that calmed her down a bit. Meanwhile Clarisa, with an expression of great melancholy, put everything in order and served the last dish of food for her husband. He put the tray before the closed door and called for the first time in over forty years. -How many times have I said do not bother me? the decrepit voice of the judge protested.

- "Excuse me, dear, I just want to let you know that I'm going to die."

- "When? -On Friday. - It's okay"-and he did not open the door. Clarisa called her children to tell them about her next weekend and then she lay down on her bed. He had a large, dark room with heavy carved mahogany furniture that did not turn into antiques, because deterioration defeated them on the way. On the dresser was a glass urn with a baby Jesus of wax of a surprising realism, it looked like a newly bathed baby.

- "I would like you to stay with the little boy, so you can take care of me, Eva."

- "You do not think about dying, do not make me go through these scares." -You have to put it in the shade, if the sun hits it melts. It has lasted almost a century and may last another if you defend it from the weather.

I arranged her merengue hair at the top of her head, I decorated her hair with a ribbon and I sat next to her, ready to accompany her in that trance, without knowing for sure what it was, because the moment lacked everything. sentimentality, as if it were not really an agony, but a mild cold.

- "It would be good to confess, do not you think, daughter? "But what sins can you have, Clarisa?" Life is long and there is plenty of time for evil, with God's favor.

- "You will go straight to heaven, if heaven exists." -Of course it exists, but it is not so sure that they admit me. There they are very strict, "he murmured. And after a long pause he added: "Reviewing my faults, I see that there is a serious one ...

I had a shiver, fearing that this old woman with a halo of saint told me that she had intentionally eliminated her retarded children to facilitate divine justice, or that he did not believe in God and that he had devoted himself to doing good in this world only because in the balance he had had that luck, to compensate for the evil of others, which in turn was unimportant, since everything is part of the same infinite process. But nothing so dramatic confessed to me Clarisa. He turned to the window and told me blushing that he had refused to fulfill his conjugal duties.

- "What does that mean?" -I asked for. -Well ... I mean not to satisfy the carnal desires of my husband, do you understand? -Do not. - If one denies her body and he falls into the temptation to seek relief with another woman, one has moral responsibility.

- "I see. The judge fornicates and the sin is yours. -No no. It seems to me that it would be of both, it would be necessary to consult it."

- Does the husband have the same obligation to his wife? -Ah? -I mean that if you had another man, would the fault also be from your husband? - The things that occur to you, daughter! She looked at me stunned. -Don't worry, if your worst sin is having the body taken away from the judge, I'm sure God will take it as a joke. -I do not think God has any humor for those things. -Doubt of divine perfection that is a great sin, Clarisa.

He looked so healthy that it was hard to imagine his next departure, but I supposed that the saints, unlike mere mortals, have the power to die without fear and in full use of their faculties. Her prestige was so solid, that many claimed to have seen a circle of light around her head and to have heard celestial music in her presence, so it did not surprise me, to undress her to put on her nightgown, find two inflamed lumps on her shoulders, as if he were about to burst a pair of angel wings.

Clarisa's agony rumbled quickly. The children and I had to attend to an endless line of people who came to ask for their intervention in heaven for various favors or simply to say goodbye. Many expected that at the last moment a significant prodigy would occur, such as the smell of rancid bottles that infected the environment would become the perfume of camellias or his body would shine with rays of consolation. Among them his friend, the bandit, who had not amended the course and was turned into a true professional appeared. He sat down beside the dying woman's bed and told her about his wanderings without a hint of repentance.

- "I do very well. Now I get nothing more than the houses in the upper neighborhood. I steal the rich and that is not a sin. I have never had to use violence, I work cleanly, like a gentleman, " -he explained with some pride.

- "I'll have to pray a lot for you, son." -Rece, grandma, that can not hurt me. The Lady also appeared contrite to say goodbye to her dear friend, bringing a wreath of flowers and some alfajor sweets to contribute to the wake. My old employer did not recognize me, but I had no difficulty in identifying her, because she had not changed so much, she looked pretty good, despite her fatness, her wig and her extravagant plastic shoes with golden stars. Unlike the thief, she came to tell Clarissa that her old advice had fallen on fertile soil and now she was a decent Christian.

- "Tell him to San Pedro, so he can erase me from the black book," he asked.

- "What a terrible disappointment these good people will take if instead of going to heaven I end up cooking in the pailas of hell ... -commented the dying woman, when I finally closed the door to rest a little.

- "If that happens up there, no one here will know, Clarisa."

- "Better like that. From the dawn of Friday a crowd gathered in the street and with great difficulty their children managed to prevent the overflow of believers ready to take any relic, from pieces of paper on the walls to the scant clothing of the saint. Clarisa was losing sight and for the first time she showed signs of taking her own death seriously. At about ten o'clock a blue car with Congress plates stopped in front of the house. The driver helped an old man get out of the back seat, which the crowd recognized immediately. It was Don Diego Cienfuegos, who became a hero after many decades of service in public life. The children of Clarisa went out to receive it and accompanied him in his painful climb to the second floor. When she saw him in the doorway, Clarisa was encouraged, the blush returned to her cheeks and the brightness in her eyes.

- "Please, get everyone out of the room and leave us alone," he breathed into my ear. Twenty minutes later the door opened and Don Diego Cienfuegos shuffled out, his eyes watering, battered and crippled, but smiling. Clarisa's children, who were waiting for him in the corridor, took him by the arms again to help him and then, seeing them together, confirmed something that he had noticed before. These three men had the same poise and profile, the same slow security, the same wise eyes and firm hands.

I waited for them to go down the stairs and I returned to my friend. I went over to arrange the pillows and saw that she too, like her visitor, was crying with a certain amount of joy.

-Don Diego was his most serious sin, right? I whispered.

-That was not a sin, daughter, just a help to God to balance the balance of destiny. And you can see how it turned out very well, because for two retarded children I had another two to take care of them. That night Clarisa died without anguish. Of cancer, the doctor diagnosed when seeing his cocoons of wings; of holiness, proclaimed the devotees crowded in the street with candles and flowers; of amazement, I say, because I was with her when the Pope visited us.

TOAD'S MOUTH

They were very hard times in the south. Not in the south of this country, but in the world, where the seasons are changed and winter does not happen at Christmas, as in educated nations, but in the middle of the year, as in the barbarian regions. Stone, coirón and ice, extensive plains that towards Tierra del Fuego are shelled in a rosary of islands, peaks of snowy mountain range closing the horizon in the distance, silence installed there since the birth of time and interrupted at times by the underground sigh of the glaciers gliding slowly towards the sea. It is a harsh nature, inhabited by tough men. At the beginning of the century there was nothing there that the English could take, but they obtained concessions to raise sheep. In a few years the animals multiplied in such a way that from a distance they seemed clouds trapped at ground level, they ate all the vegetation and trampled the last altars -U the indigenous cultures. In that place Hermelinda made a living with fantasy games. In the middle of the wasteland stood, like an abandoned cake, the great house of the Cattle Company, surrounded by an absurd lawn, defended against the abuses of the climate by the wife of the administrator, who could not resign himself to live outside the heart of the British Empire and continued to dress for dinner alone with her husband, a phlegmatic gentleman steeped in the pride of obsolete traditions. The Creole laborers lived in the barracks of the camp, separated from their patrons by fences of spiny shrubs and wild roses, who tried in vain to limit the immensity of the pampas and create for foreigners the illusion of a soft English countryside.

Guarded by the management guards, tormented by the cold and without taking a homemade soup for months, the workers survived the misfortune, as helpless as the livestock in their charge. In the afternoons there was no shortage of who would take the guitar and then the landscape filled with sentimental songs. such was the dearth of love, despite the fire stone laid by the cook in food to appease the desires of the body and the urgencies of memories, the peons lay with sheep and even some seals, if approached the coast and managed to hunt it. These beasts have large breasts, like mother's breasts, and when they remove their skin, when they are still alive, hot, throbbing, a very needy man can close his eyes and imagine that he embraces a mermaid. In spite of these inconveniences, the workers enjoyed themselves more than their employers, thanks to Hermelinda's legal games. She was the only young woman in every sense of that land, apart from the English lady who just crossed the fence roses to kill hares gunshots and on those occasions barely reached to glimpse the veil of her hat in the middle of a dust of hell and a clamor of retrievers. Hermelinda, on the other hand, was a close and precise female, with a daring mixture of blood in her veins and a good disposition to celebrate. He had chosen that office of consolation by pure and simple vocation, he liked almost all men in general and many in particular. Among them reigned like an empress bee. He loved in them the smell of work and desire, the hoarse voice, the beard of two days, the vigorous body and at the same time so vulnerable in his hands, the combative nature and the naive heart.

He knew the illusory strength and extreme weakness of his clients, but none of those conditions was used, on the contrary, he felt sorry for both. In her wild nature there were traces of motherly tenderness and often the night was found by sewing patches on a shirt, cooking a chicken for some sick worker or writing love letters for remote brides. He made his fortune on a mattress stuffed with raw wool, under a roof of perforated zinc, which produced music from flutes and oboes when the wind came through. His flesh was firm and his skin unblemished, he laughed with gusto and had plenty of guts, much more than a terrified sheep or a poor seal without leather could offer. In each hug, however brief, she revealed herself as an enthusiastic and naughty friend. The fame of her solid rider's legs and her invulnerable breasts had traveled six hundred kilometers of rugged province and her lovers traveled from

afar to spend some time in her company. On Fridays they came galloping wildly from such far ends, that the beasts, covered with foam, fell fainting. The English patrons forbade the consumption of alcohol, but Hermelinda managed to distill a clandestine brandy with which it improved the mood and ruined the liver of its guests, and also served to light their lamps at the time of fun. Bets began after the third round of liquor, when it was impossible to concentrate the view or to sharpen the understanding.

Hermelinda had discovered the way to obtain safe benefits without cheating. Apart from cards and dice, men had several games and always the only reward was their person. The losers gave him their money and those who won also gave it to him, but they obtained the right to enjoy a very short time in his company, without subterfuge or preliminaries, not because she lacked good will, but because she did not have time to give to all a more careful attention. The participants in the blind hen took off their trousers, but kept their vests, hats and boots covered in lambskin, to defend themselves against the Antarctic cold that whistled between the planks. She blindfolded them and the persecution began. Sometimes there was such an uproar that the laughter and gasps crossed the night beyond the roses and reached the ears of the English, who remained impassive, pretending that it was only the caprice of the wind in the pampa, while they continued to drink with parsimony. His last cup of Ceylon tea before going to bed. The first one who laid his hand on Hermelinda gave an exultant cackle and blessed her good fortune, while imprisoning her in his arms. The Swing was another of the games. The woman sat on a table hung from the ceiling by two ropes. Defying the men's eyes, he flexed his legs and everyone could see that nothing was under his yellow petticoats. The players ordered in a row, had only one chance to ram it and whoever achieved his goal was caught between the thighs of the beautiful, in a flutter of petticoats, balanced, shaken to the bone and finally raised to heaven. But very few got it and most rolled on the floor among the laughter of others.

In the game of El Sapo a man could lose in fifteen minutes the pay of the month. Hermelinda drew a line of chalk on the floor and four steps away traced a wide circle, inside which he reclined, with his knees open 'golden legs in the light of brandy lamps' then appeared the dark center of his body, open like a fruit, like a cheerful toad mouth, while the air of the room became dense and hot. The players stood behind the chalk mark and threw for the target. Some were expert shooters, with such a sure pulse that they could stop a terrified animal in the middle of the race by throwing between its legs two stone boleadoras tied by a rope, but Hermelinda had an imperceptible way of hiding the body, of slipping away so that at the last moment the coin lost its way. Those that landed inside the chalk circle belonged to the woman. If anyone entered the door, he gave his owner the treasure of the Sultan, two hours behind the curtain alone with her, in complete rejoicing, to seek consolation for all past hardships and to dream of the pleasures of paradise.

They said, who had lived those two precious hours, that Hermelinda knew ancient love secrets and was able to lead a man to the threshold of his own death and bring him back turned into a wise man.

Until the day that Pablo, the Asturian, appeared, very few had won that couple of prodigious hours, although several had enjoyed something similar, but not for a few cents, but for half their salary. By then she had accumulated a small fortune, but the idea of retiring to a more conventional life had not occurred to her yet, she really enjoyed her work and she was proud of the happy sparks she could offer to the peons. Pablo was a lean man, with chicken bones and infant hands, whose physical appearance was contradicted by the tremendous tenacity of his temperament. Beside the affluent and jovial Hermelinda, he looked like a sulky scoundrel, but those who, seeing him arrive, thought they could laugh for a while at his expense, got an unpleasant surprise. The little stranger reacted like a snake at the first provocation, ready to fight whoever was ahead, but the fight was exhausted before starting, because Hermelinda's first rule was that under her roof was not fought. Once his dignity was established, Paul calmed down. He had

a determined and somewhat mournful expression, spoke little, and when he did, his Spanish accent was evident. He had left his homeland escaping from the police and lived by smuggling through the canyons of the Andes. Until then he had been a surly and quarrelsome hermit, mocking the climate, the sheep and the English. He did not belong anywhere and he did not recognize loves or duties, but he was not so young anymore and loneliness was getting to his bones. Sometimes he woke up at dawn on the frozen ground, wrapped in his black blanket of Castile and with the saddle for a pillow, feeling that his whole body ached. It was not a pain of numb muscles, but of accumulated sadness and abandonment. He was tired of wandering like a wolf, but neither was he made for domestic meekness. He came to these lands because he heard the rumor that at the end of the world there was a woman capable of twisting the direction of the wind, and he wanted to see it with his own eyes. The enormous distance and the risks of the road did not make him desist and when he finally found himself in the hold and had Hermelinda within arm's reach, he saw that she was made of his own stout metal and decided that after such a long journey it was not worth living without her. He settled in a corner of the room to watch her carefully and to calculate her possibilities.

At noon, the lovers left the room. Pablo did not cross a glance with anyone, he left to saddle his horse, another for Hermelinda and a mule to carry the luggage. The woman wore trousers and a traveling jacket and carried a duffel bag full of coins tied around her waist. There was a new expression in her eyes and a satisfied wobble in her memorable rear. Both of them calmly accommodated the gear on the backs of the animals, got on the horses and started walking. Hermelinda made a vague signal of farewell to her desolate admirers and followed Pablo, the Asturian, through the bare plains, without looking back. He never returned. The consternation caused by the departure of Hermelinda was so great that, to amuse its workers, the Livestock Company installed swings, bought darts and arrows for target shooting, and had brought from London an enormous earthenware toad painted with its mouth open, so that the pawns will refine the aim by throwing coins; but before the general indifference, these toys ended up decorating the terrace of the management, where the English still use them to fight the boredom at dusk.

THE GOLD OF TOMAS VARGAS

Before the huge ball of progress began, those who had some savings, they buried them, it was the only known way to save money, but later people took confidence from the banks. When they made the road and it was easier to get by bus to the city, they exchanged their gold and silver coins for wallpaper and put them in safes, as if they were treasures. Tomás Vargas made fun of them with laughter, because he never believed in that system. Time proved him right and when the government of the Benefactor was over - which lasted about thirty years, according to what the bills say, they were worthless and many ended up glued to the walls, as an infamous reminder of the candor of their owners. While everyone else wrote letters to the new President and the newspapers to complain about the collective scam of the new coins, Tomás Vargas had his golden morocotas in a secure burial, although that did not diminish his habits of misery and beggar. He was a man without decency, borrowed money with no intention of returning it, and kept the children hungry and the woman in rags, while he wore sombreros hats and smoked cigars. She did not even pay the school fee, her six legitimate children were educated for free because Maes Ines decided that while she was in her right mind and with the strength to work, no child in the town would not know how to read. Age did not take away the quarrelsome, drinker and womanizer. He was very honored to be the most macho of the region, as he proclaimed in the square every time the drunkenness made him lose his understanding and announce at the top of his lungs the names of the girls he had seduced and the bastards who carried his blood. If they were to believe him, he had about three hundred because in each outburst he gave different names. The policemen took him several times and the lieutenant in person gave him a few cheeks in the buttocks, to see if his character was regenerated, but that did not give more results than the priest's admonitions. In truth, he only respected Riad Halabí, the owner of the store, for that reason the neighbors resorted to him when they suspected that his hand had run out with dissipation and he was beating his wife or his children. On these occasions, the Arab left the counter in such a hurry that he did not remember closing the store, and presented himself, stifled with justice's displeasure, to bring order to the ranch of the Vargas. He did not need to say much, it was enough for the old man to see him appear to calm down. Riad Halabí was the only one capable of shaming that scoundrel.

Antonia Sierra, Vargas's wife, was twenty-six years younger than him. By the time she was in her quarantine, she was very worn, her teeth were almost gone, and her hardened mulatto body had been deformed by work, births, and miscarriages; however, he still retained the trace of his past arrogance, a way of walking with his head erect and his waist broken, a remnant of ancient beauty, a tremendous pride that stopped any attempt to feel sorry for him. They barely had time to complete their day, because in addition to caring for their children and taking care of the garden and the chickens, they earned a few pesos by cooking the policemen's lunch, washing other people's clothes and cleaning the school. Sometimes she walked with her body strewn with blue bruises and although no one asked, all Holy Water knew of the beatings by her husband. Only Riad Halabí and Maesa Ines dared to make discreet gifts, looking for excuses not to offend her, some clothes, food, notebooks and vitamins for their children.

Many humiliations had to endure Antonia Sierra of her husband, even to impose a concubine in his own home.

Concha Díaz arrived in Agua Santa aboard one of the trucks of the Compañía de

Petróleos, as disconsolate and lamentable as a ghost. The driver felt sorry to see her barefoot on the road, with her tied to the back and her belly pregnant woman. When crossing the village, the trucks stopped in the warehouse, for that reason Riad Halabí was first in finding out the subject. He saw her

appear at his door and the way he dropped his bundle in front of the counter he realized to the point that he was not passing through, that girl was coming to stay. She was very young, dark and short, with a compact mat of frizzy hair bleached by the sun, where a comb had not appeared in a long time. As he always did with the visitors, Riad Halabí offered Concha a chair and a pineapple soda and prepared to listen to the account of his adventures or his misfortunes, but the girl spoke little, she just blew her nose with her fingers, his eyes fixed on the ground, tears falling without haste down his cheeks and a string of reproaches sprouting between his teeth. At last the Arab managed to understand that he wanted to see Tomás Vargas and sent for him to the tavern. He waited for him at the door and barely had him in front of him and took him by the arm and faced him with the stranger, without giving him time to recover from the fright. "The young woman says the baby is yours," Riad Halabi said with that soft tone he used when he was outraged.

-Okay, girl, calm down. You can stay in my house for a while, at least until the birth of the creature.

Concha Díaz began to sob harder and said that she would not live anywhere, only with Tomás Vargas, because that was what she had come for. The air stopped in the warehouse, there was a very long silence, only the fans could be heard in the ceiling and the woman's moquilleo, without anyone daring to tell him that the old man was married and had six children. Finally Vargas took the bulk of the traveler and helped her stand up.

"Very well, Conchita, if that's what you want, there's no more to talk about. We're going to my house right now," he said.

This is how, when she returned from her work, Antonia Sierra found another woman resting in her hammock and for the first time the pride did not reach her to hide her feelings. His insults rolled down the main street and the echo came to the square and went into all the houses, announcing that Concha Díaz was a filthy rat and that Antonia Sierra would make her life impossible until returning her to the stream from where she never had to leave. If she thought her children were going to live under the same roof with a rabipela, she would be surprised, because she was not a boor, and her husband had better be careful, because she had endured a lot of suffering and a lot of disappointment, all in name of her children, poor innocents, but it was good, now everyone was going to see who Antonia Sierra was. The tantrum lasted a week, after which the screams became a continuous murmur and lost the last vestige of her beauty, she had no way to walk, she crawled like a beaten dog. The neighbors tried to explain that all this mess was not Concha's fault, but Vargas's, but she was not willing to listen to advice from temperance or justice.

Riad Halabí took the patient in her van to the hospital and Antonia accompanied them. They came back with a bag of pills of different colors and a new dress for Concha, because his did not fall from the waist anymore. The misfortune of the other woman forced Antonia Sierra to relive fragments of her youth, of her first pregnancy and of the same violence that she endured. He wished, in spite of himself, that the future of Concha Díaz was not as dismal as his own. He no longer had anger, but a quiet compassion, and began to treat her like a daughter gone astray, with an abrupt authority that barely managed to hide her tenderness. The young woman was terrified to see the pernicious changes in her body, that deformity that increased without control, the shame of walking around peeing little by little and walking like a goose, that uncontrollable repulsion and the desire to die. Some days she woke up very sick and could not get out of bed, then Antonia took the children to take care of her while she left to do her work at the races, to return early to attend her; but on other occasions Concha dawned more cheerful and

when Antonia returned exhausted, she found herself with the dinner ready and the house clean. The girl served him coffee and stood by his side, waiting for him to drink it, with a liquid look of grateful animal.

The boy was born in the hospital in the city, because he did not want to come to the world and they had to open Concha Díaz to get it out. Antonia stayed with her for eight days, during which Maestra Ines took care of her children. The two women returned in the truck of the warehouse and all Agua Santa came out to welcome them. The mother came smiling, while Antonia exhibited the newborn with a grandmother's cheer, announcing that Riad Vargas Díaz would be baptized, in just homage to the Turk, because without her help the mother would not have arrived in time to motherhood and it was also he who he took care of the expenses when the father turned a deaf ear and pretended more drunk than usual so as not to dig up his gold.

Before two weeks Tomás Vargas wanted to demand that Concha Díaz return to his hammock, despite the fact that the woman still had a fresh coat and a war bandage on her belly, but Antonia Sierra stood before her with her hands on her hips, decided for the first time in its existence to prevent the old man from doing according to his whim. Her husband started to take off his belt to get rid of the usual buckles, but she did not let him finish the gesture and it fell on her with such fierceness that the man stepped back, surprised. That hesitation he lost, because she knew then who was the strongest. Meanwhile, Concha Díaz had left his son in a corner and was holding up a heavy clay pot, with the obvious intention of bursting it in his head. The man understood his disadvantage and left the ranch throwing blasphemies. All Holy Water knew what happened because he himself told the brothel girls, who also said that Vargas was no longer working and that all his stallion displays were pure boasting and no foundation.

From that incident things changed. Concha Díaz quickly recovered and while Antonia Sierra went to work, she stayed in charge of the children and the tasks of the garden and the house. Tomás Vargas swallowed the uneasiness and returned humbly to his hammock, where he had no company. He relieved the ill-treated spite to his children and commenting in the tavern that the women, like the mules, only understand sticks, but in the house he did not try to punish them again. In drunkenness he shouted the advantages of bigamy to the four winds and the priest had to spend several Sundays refuting it from the pulpit, so that he would not catch the idea and go to hell for so many years of preaching the Christian virtue of monogamy.

In Holy Water it could be tolerated that a man mistreated his family, was lazy, bochinero and did not return the borrowed money, but the debts of the game were sacred. In the cockfights the bills were placed well folded between the fingers, where everyone could see them, and in the domino, the dice or the cards, were placed on the table to the left of the player. Sometimes the truckers of the Petroleum Company stopped for a few rounds of poker and although they did not show their money, before leaving they paid every penny. On Saturdays the guards of the Santa María Prison would come to visit the brothel and play their week's pay at the tavern. Neither they-who were much more bandits than the prisoners in their charge-dared to play if they could not pay. Nobody violated that rule.

Tomás Vargas did not bet, but he liked to watch the players, he could spend hours watching a domino, he was the first to settle in the cockfights and followed the numbers of the lottery that announced on the radio, although he never bought one. He was defended from that temptation by the size of his greed. However, when the fierce complicity of Antonia Sierra and Concha Díaz definitively diminished the virile impetus, she turned towards the game. At first he bet a few miserable tips and only the poorest drunks agreed to sit down at the table with him, but with the cards he had more luck than with his women and soon the comedian of the easy money came and began to decompose to the very core of his petty

nature. With the hope of getting rich in a single stroke of fortune and recovering step-by-step the illusory projection of that triumph - his humiliated prestige as a pimp, began to increase the risks. Soon the bravest players were measured with him and the others made a wheel to follow the alternatives of each match. Tomás Vargas did not put the tickets stretched on the table, as was the tradition, but paid when he lost. At home, poverty worsened and Concha went to work too. The children were left alone and Maesa Ines had to feed them so that they did not go around the town learning to beg.

Things got complicated for Tomás Vargas when he accepted the Lieutenant's challenge and after six hours of play he earned two hundred pesos. The officer confiscated the salary of his subordinates to pay for the defeat. He was a swarthy well-planted, with a walrus mustache and the jacket always open so that the girls could appreciate his hairy torso and his collection of gold chains. Nobody esteemed him in Holy Water, because he was a man of unpredictable character and he attributed the authority to invent laws according to his whim and convenience. Before his arrival, the jail was only a couple of rooms to spend the night after a fight - there were never serious crimes in Agua Santa and the only criminals were the prisoners on their way to the Santa María Prison - but the Lieutenant He made sure that no one went through the checkpoint without taking a good beating. Thanks to him people took fear of the law. He was outraged at the loss of the two hundred pesos, but he delivered the money without a murmur and even with some elegant detachment, because even he, with all the weight of his power, had not risen from the table.

Tomás Vargas spent two days bragging about his triumph, until the Lieutenant told him he was waiting for him on Saturday for the rematch. This time the bet would be one thousand pesos, he announced with such a peremptory tone that the other remembered the blows received in the rear and did not dare to refuse. On Saturday afternoon the tavern was full of people. In the grip and heat the air was exhausted and the table had to be taken out to the street so that everyone could witness the game. Never had so much money been bet on Agua Santa and to ensure the cleanliness of the procedure they appointed Riad Halabí. This began by demanding that the public stay two steps away, to prevent any cheating, and that the Lieutenant and the other policemen left their weapons at the checkpoint.

-Before starting both players must put their money on the table -said the referee.

"My word is enough, Turkish," replied the Lieutenant. - In that case my word is enough - added Tomás Vargas.

-How will they pay if they lose? asked Riad Halabí. -I have a house in the capital, if I lose Vargas will have the titles tomorrow.

-It's okay. And you? -I pay with the gold that I have buried. The game was the most exciting event in the town in many years. All Holy Water, even the elderly and children gathered in the street. The only absentees were Antonia Sierra and Concha Díaz. Neither the Lieutenant nor Tomás Vargas inspired any sympathy, so it did not matter who won; the fun was to guess the anguish of the two players and those who had bet on one or the other. Tomás Vargas benefited from the fact that until then he had been lucky with the cards, but the Lieutenant had the advantage of his cold blood and his prestige as a bully.

At seven o'clock in the afternoon the game ended and, in accordance with the established rules, Riad Halabi declared the winner the Lieutenant. In the triumph the policeman maintained the same calm that he showed the week before in the defeat, neither a mocking smile, nor an excessive word, he just sat in his chair scratching his teeth with the nail of his little finger.

"Well, Vargas, the time has come to dig up your treasure," he said when the voices of the voyeurs were silent.

Tomás Vargas's skin had become ashen, his shirt was soaked with sweat and it seemed that the air did not enter his body, it got stuck in his mouth. Twice he tried to stand up and his knees failed. Riad Halabí had to support him. At last he gathered the strength to start walking towards the road, followed by the Lieutenant, the police, the Arab, Maestra Ines and further back the whole town in a noisy procession. They walked a couple of miles and then Vargas turned right, getting into the tumult of the glutinous vegetation that surrounded Agua Santa. There was no path, but he made his way without great hesitation between the gigantic trees and the ferns, until he reached the edge of a barely visible ravine, because the jungle was an impenetrable screen. There the crowd stopped, while he went down with the Lieutenant. It was humid and oppressive, despite the fact that it was close to sunset. Tomás Vargas signaled that he should be left alone, crawled on his hands and knees, and disappeared under some philodendrons with large, fleshy leaves. A long minute passed before his scream was heard. The lieutenant got into the foliage, grabbed him by the ankles and yanked him out.

-What happens! - It is not there, it is not! - How is it not! -I swear, my lieutenant, I do not know anything, they stole it, they stole my treasure! And she burst into tears like a widow, so desperate that she did not even notice the kicks the Lieutenant gave her.

-Dumbass! You will pay me! For your mother, you're going to pay me! Riad Halabí threw himself down the ravine and took it from his hands before he turned him into a mazamorra. He managed to convince the Lieutenant to calm down, because by blows they would not solve the matter, and then he helped the old man to climb. Tomás Vargas had his skeleton dismayed by the horror of what had happened, he was choking with sobs and there were so many hesitations and faints that the Arab had to carry him almost in his arms all the way back, until finally depositing him in his ranch. At the door were Antonia Sierra and Concha Diaz sitting on two straw chairs, drinking coffee and watching the night fall. They did not give any sign of consternation when they found out what happened and continued to sip their coffee, immutable.

Tomás Vargas was feverish for more than a week, delirious with gold morocotas and marked cards, but he was of a firm nature and instead of dying of anguish, as everyone supposed, he regained his health. When he was able to get up he did not dare to leave for several days, but finally his love for the party was more than his prudence, he took his hat of guama hair and, still trembling and frightened, left for the tavern. That night he did not return and two days later someone brought the news that he was squashed in the same ravine where he had hidden his treasure. They found it open in a machete channel, like a beef, as everyone knew it would end their days, sooner or later. Antonia Sierra and Concha Diaz buried him without great signs of disconsolation and without any other courtship than Riad Halabí and Maestra Ines, who went to accompany them and not to pay posthumous tribute to whom they had despised in life. The two women continued to live together, willing to help each other in the upbringing of their children and in the vicissitudes of each day. Shortly after the burial they bought chickens, rabbits and pigs, went by bus to the city and returned with clothes for the whole family. That year they fixed the ranch with new boards, added two rooms, painted it blue and then installed a gas stove, where they started a food industry to sell at home. Every noon they left with all the children to distribute their meats at the checkpoint, the school, the mail, and if there were lots left over at the store counter, Riad Halabí would offer them to the truckers. And so they came out of misery and started on the path of prosperity.

IF YOU TOUCHED MY HEART

Amadeo Peralta grew up in his father's gang and became a bully, like all the men in his family. His father thought that the studies are for queers, books are not required to succeed in life, but balls and cunning, he said, that's why he formed his children in rudeness. Over time, however, he understood that the world was changing very fast and that his businesses needed to consolidate on a more stable basis. The era of rampant pillage had been replaced by corruption and underhanded dispossession, it was time to manage wealth with modern criteria and improve its image. He gathered his children and imposed the task of making friends with influential people and learning legal issues, so that they would continue to prosper without danger of impunity. He also entrusted them to find brides among the oldest names in the region, to see if they could wash the name of the Peralta from so much mud and blood spatter. By then Amadeo had turned thirty-two years old and had a deep-rooted habit of seducing girls and then leaving them, so that the idea of marriage did not like anything, but did not dare to disobey his father. He began courting the daughter of a landowner whose family had lived in the same place for six generations. Despite the troubled reputation of the suitor, she accepted it, because she was very unattractive and feared remaining single. They then started one of those boring courtships in the province. Uncomfortable in his white linen suit and his polished booties, Amadeo visited her every day under the watchful eye of the future mother-in-law or some aunt, and while the young lady was serving coffee and guava cakes, he peered at the clock, calculating the right moment. to say goodbye.

A few weeks before the wedding, Amadeo Peralta had to make a business trip around the province. So he came to Agua Santa, one of those places where nobody stays and whose name travelers rarely remember. He was passing through a narrow street, at siesta time, cursing the heat and that sweet smell of mango jam that overwhelmed the air, when he heard a crystalline sound like water sliding between stones, coming from a modest house, with the paint peeling from the sun and rain, as almost all there. Through the grating he saw a hall of dark tiles and whitewashed walls, at the back a patio and beyond the surprising sight of a girl sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding on her knees a blond wood psalter. He stayed a while watching her.

"Come, girl," he called, finally. She lifted her face and despite the distance he could see the astonished eyes and the uncertain smile on a face still childish. Come with me, "he said, implored Amadeo in a dry voice.

She hesitated. The last notes were suspended in the courtyard air as a question. Peralta called again, she stood up and approached, he put his arm between the bars of the fence, ran the latch, opened the door and took her hand, while he recited all his repertoire of gallant, swearing that he had seen her in dreams, that he had searched for her all his life, that he could not let her go and that she was the woman destined for him, all of which he could have omitted, because the girl was simple in spirit and did not understand the meaning of His words, although perhaps the tone of the voice seduced her. Hortensia had just turned fifteen and her body was ready for the first hug, although she did not know it and could not give a name to those anxieties and tremors. It was so easy for him to take her to his car and drive her to a field, which an hour later he had completely forgotten. She could not remember her either, when a week later she suddenly appeared at her house, at one hundred and forty miles away, dressed in a yellow cotton apron and canvas espadrilles, with her psaltery under her arm, lit by the fever of love.

Forty-seven years later, when Hortensia was rescued from the pit where she had been buried and the journalists traveled from all over the country to photograph her, she herself did not know her name or how she got there.

-Why did he keep her locked up like a miserable beast? -the reporters went to Amadeo Peralta. "Because I felt like it," he replied calmly. By then he was eighty years old and as lucid as ever, but he did not understand that late fuss over something that had happened so long ago.

He was not willing to give explanations. He was an authoritative word man, patriarch and great-grandfather, nobody dared to look him in the eyes and even the priests greeted him with bowed head. In his long life he increased the fortune inherited from his father, seized all the lands from the ruins of the Spanish fort to the limits of the state and then launched into a political career that made him the most powerful cacique in the area. He married the ugly landowner's daughter, with her he had nine legitimate descendants and with other women he fathered an inaccurate number of bastards, without remembering any of them because his heart was definitely mutilated for love. The only one that could not be completely discarded was to Hortensia, because it stuck in her consciousness like a persistent nightmare. After the brief encounter with her among the grass of a vacant lot, she returned to her house, her work, and her unsatisfied girlfriend of honorable family. It was Hortensia who searched for him until he found him, it was she who crossed him in front and clung to his shirt with a terrifying submission of a slave. What a mess, he thought then, I was about to marry with pomp and fanfare and this deranged girl crosses my path. He wanted to get rid of her, but when he saw her in his yellow dress and his pleading eyes, it seemed a waste not to take the opportunity and he decided to hide it while some solution occurred to him.

And so, almost by accident, Hortensia went to the basement of the old sugar mill of the Peralta, where she remained buried throughout her life. It was a broad, humid, dark, suffocating place in summer and cold on some nights of the dry season, furnished with a few pieces of junk and a pallet. Amadeo Peralta did not have time to adjust it better, although he sometimes stroked the fantasy of turning the girl into a concubine of oriental tales, wrapped in light tulles and surrounded by peacock feathers, brocade borders, glass lamps painted, golden furniture with crooked legs and hairy carpets where he could walk barefoot. Maybe he would have done it if she had remembered his promises, but Hortensia was like a nocturnal bird, one of those blind guácharos that inhabit the bottom of the caves, he only needed a little food and water. The yellow dress rotted on her body and she ended up naked.

"He loves me, he has always loved me," she declared, when the neighbors rescued her. In so many years of confinement he had lost the use of words and his voice was shaking, like a dying snoring.

The first weeks Amadeo spent a lot of time in the basement with her, satisfying an appetite that she thought was inexhaustible. Fearing that she would be discovered and jealous even of her own eyes, she did not want to expose her to natural light and only let in a faint ray through the ventilating skylight. In the darkness they frolicked in the greatest disorder of the senses, with fiery skin and heart turned into a hungry crab. There the smells and tastes acquired an extreme quality. By touching in the darkness they managed to penetrate the essence of the other and immerse themselves in the most secret. In that place their voices resounded with a repeated echo, the walls gave back the murmurs and kisses. The basement became a sealed vial where they wallowed like mischievous twins navigating in amniotic waters, two turgid and dazed creatures. For a while they went astray in an absolute intimacy that they confused with love.

When Hortensia fell asleep, her lover went out to find something to eat and before she woke up she returned with renewed vigor to embrace her again. Thus they should love each other until they die defeated by desire, they should devour each other or burn like a double torch; but none of that happened. Instead, it happened as predictable and everyday, the less grandiose. Before a month Amadeo Peralta tired of the games, which were already starting to repeat themselves, felt the humidity gnawing at his joints and

began to think about everything that was on the other side of that club. It was time to return to the world of the living and regain the reins of their destiny.

-Expect me here, girl. I'm going outside to make myself very rich. I'll bring you gifts, dresses and queen jewelry, "he said as he said goodbye. "I want children," said Hortensia.

- Children, no, but you will have dolls. In the following months Peralta forgot the dresses, the jewels and the dolls. He visited Hortensia every time he remembered, not always for lovemaking, sometimes just to hear her play some ancient melody in the psaltery, he liked to see her leaning over the instrument by pressing the strings. Sometimes she was in such a hurry that she could not even cross a word with her, filled her pitchers with water, left a bag of groceries and left. When he forgot to do it for nine days and found her dying, he understood the need to get someone to help him take care of his prisoner, because his family, his travels, his business and his social commitments kept him very busy. An hermetic Indian served him for that purpose. She kept the key of the padlock and went regularly to clean the dungeon and scrape the lichens that grew on Hortensia in the body as a delicate and pale flora, almost invisible to the naked eye, smelling of earth removed and something abandoned.

- "Did not you have pity on that poor woman?" they asked the Indian when she was also taken away, accused of complicity in the kidnapping, but she did not answer and just looked straight ahead with undaunted eyes and cast a black spit of tobacco.

No, she did not feel sorry because she believed that the other had the vocation of being a slave and therefore she was happy, or that she was an idiot by birth and, like so many in her condition, she was better locked up than exposed to the jokes and dangers of the street. Hortensia did not contribute to change the opinion that her jailor had of her, never showed any curiosity about the world, did not try to go out to breathe clean air or complain about anything. She did not seem bored either, her mind was stopped at some point in childhood and loneliness ended up disturbing her completely. In reality it was becoming an underground creature. In that grave her senses were sharpened and she learned to see the invisible, surrounded by amazing spirits that led her by the hand through other universes. While her body remained shrunk in a corner, she traveled through sidereal space like a messenger particle, living in a dark territory, beyond reason. If he had had a mirror to look at himself, he would have been terrified of his own appearance, but since he could not see himself, he did not notice his deterioration, he did not know of the scales that appeared on his skin, of the silk worms that nested in his long hair. Bast, from the leaden clouds that covered his already dead eyes from so much peeping in the gloom. He did not feel the ears grow to catch the external sounds, even the faintest and farthest, like the laughter of children at school recess, the ice cream seller's bell, the birds in flight, murmur of the river. Nor did she realize that her previously graceful and firm legs twisted to accommodate the need to be still and crawl, or that the toenails grew like beast's hooves, the bones were transformed into glass tubes His belly sank and a hump appeared. Only the hands kept their shape and size, always occupied in the exercise of the psaltery, although their fingers did not remember the learned melodies and instead they tore the instrument from the crying that did not come out of the chest. By far Hortensia looked like a sad fair monkey and up close inspired infinite pity. She had no conscience of those evil transformations, in her memory she kept the image of herself intact, she was still the same girl that she saw reflected for the last time in the window of Amadeo Peralta's car, the day that led her to his lair. She thought she was as pretty as ever and continued to act as if she were, so the memory of her beauty was crouched inside her and anyone who approached her enough could glimpse her under her prehistoric dwarf appearance.

Meanwhile, Amadeo Peralta, rich and feared, spread the network of his power throughout the region. On Sundays he would sit at the head of a long table, with his sons and grandsons, his henchmen

and accomplices, and with some special guests, politicians and military leaders whom he treated with a noisy cordiality, not without the haughtiness necessary so that remember who the master was Behind his back was rumored of his victims, of how many he left in ruins or made to disappear, of the bribes to the authorities, that half of his fortune came from contraband; but nobody was willing to look for evidence. They also said that Peralta kept a woman prisoner in a basement. This part of his black legend was repeated with greater certainty than that of his legitimate businesses, in fact many knew it and over time became an open secret.

One very hot afternoon, three children escaped from school to bathe in the river. They spent a couple of hours splashing in the mud of the shore and then went to roam near the old sugar mill of the Peralta, closed for two generations, when the cane stopped being profitable. The place was reputed to be enchanted, they said that noises of demons were heard, and many had seen a disheveled witch there, invoking the souls of dead slaves. Exalted by the adventure, the boys got into the property and approached the factory building. Soon they dared to enter the ruins, they went through the wide rooms with wide walls of adobe and beams gnawed by the termites, they avoided the overgrown undergrowth of the ground, the garbage and dog shit hills, the rotten tiles and the nests of snakes. Taking courage by jokes, pushing themselves, they came to the grinding room, a huge room open to the sky, with the remains of broken machinery, where rain and sun had created an impossible garden and where they thought they perceived a penetrating trail of sugar and sweat. When the fright began to be removed, they heard a monstrous song clearly. Trembling, they tried to retreat, but the attraction of the horror overcame the fear and they crouched listening until the last note was stuck in their foreheads. Little by little they managed to overcome the immobility, they shook the fright and began to look for the origin of those strange sounds, so different from any known music, and thus they found a small trap at ground level, closed with a padlock that they could not open . They shook the wooden board that closed the entrance and an indescribable smell of caged beast hit their faces. They knocked, but no one answered, only heard a dull gasp from the other side. Then they ran away to shout that they had discovered the door of hell.

The noise of the children could not be silenced and so the neighbors finally proved what they had suspected for decades. First came the mothers behind their children to peek through the slots of the trap, and they also heard the terrible notes of the psaltery, very different from the banal melody that attracted Amadeo Peralta to stop in a narrow street of Agua Santa to dry the sweat of the forehead Behind them came a crowd of onlookers and finally, when a crowd had already gathered, the police and firemen appeared, who blew open the door with their axes and went into the pit with their lamps and their fire gear. In the cave they found a naked creature, with flaccid skin hanging in pale folds, dragging gray strands across the floor and moaning terrified by the noise and light. It was Hortensia, shining with mother-of-pearl phosphorescence under the relentless torches of the firemen, almost blind, with worn teeth and legs so weak that she could barely stand. The only sign of his human origin was an old psalter pressed against his lap.

The news produced outrage throughout the country. On the television screens and newspapers appeared the woman rescued from the hole where she spent her life, badly covered by a blanket that someone put on her shoulders. The indifference that surrounded the prisoner for almost half a century became in a few hours a passion to avenge and help her. The neighbors improvised pickets to lynch Amadeo Peralta, attacked his house, dragged him out and if the Guard did not arrive in time to get it out of his hands, they would have torn him apart in the plaza. To silence the guilt of having ignored her for so long, everyone wanted to take care of Hortensia. Money was collected To give her a pension, tons of

clothes and medicines she did not need were collected and several charities took it upon themselves to scrape off the dirt, cut her hair and dress her from head to toe, until she became a common old woman . The nuns lent her a bed in the homeless shelter and for months they had her tied up so she would not escape back to the basement, until she finally got used to the light of day and resigned herself to living with other human beings.

Taking advantage of the public furor fueled by the press, the numerous enemies of Amadeo Peralta finally gathered the courage to take a nosedive against him. The authorities, who for years protected their abuses, fell on him with the cudgel of the law. The news occupied everyone's attention long enough to drive the old leader to jail and then vanish until it disappeared completely. Rejected by his family and friends, turned into a symbol of everything abominable and abject, harassed by the guardians and his companions in misfortune, he was in prison until he was killed. He remained in his cell, never going out into the yard with the other inmates. From there he could hear 'the noises of the street. Every day, at ten o'clock in the morning, Hortensia walked with her hesitant crazy step to the prison and gave the guard at the door a hot pot for the prisoner.

"He almost never left me hungry," he told the doorman apologetically. Then he would sit on the street and play the psaltery, wiping out moans of agony that were impossible to bear. In the hope of distracting her and silencing her, some interns would give her a coin.

Crouched on the other side of the walls, Amadeo Peralta heard that sound that seemed to come from the depths of the earth and that pierced his nerves. That daily reproach must mean something, but he could not remember. Sometimes he felt a few flares of guilt, but soon his memory failed and the images of the past disappeared in a dense fog. He did not know why he was in that tomb and little by little he also forgot the world of light, abandoning himself to misery.

GIFT FOR A SWEETHEART

Horacio Fortunato had reached the age of forty-six when the emaciated Jewess came into his life who was about to change his habits as a rascal and destroy his boasting. It was a breed of circus people, those born with rubber bones and a natural ability to make deadly jumps and at the age when other creatures crawl like worms, they hang from the trapeze head down and brush the teeth to the lion. Before his father turned him into a serious company, instead of the joke that had been until then, the Fortunato Circus went through more pain than glories. In some times of catastrophe or disorder, the company was reduced to two or three members of the clan wandering the roads in a rickety wagon, with a rotund carp that rose in villages of pity. Horacio's grandfather carried only the weight of the whole show for years; he walked on a tightrope, juggled flaming torches, swallowed Toledo sabers, extracted both oranges and snakes from a top hat and danced a funny minuet with his only companion, a monkey dressed in a crinoline and feathered hat. But the grandfather managed to overcome the misfortune and while many other circuses succumbed defeated by other modern diversions, he saved his and at the end of his life he was able to retire to the south of the continent to cultivate an orchard of asparagus and strawberries, leaving him a business without debts to his son Fortunato. This man lacked the humility of his father and was not prone to balancing on the rope or to the pirouettes with a chimpanzee, but instead he was endowed with a firm merchant's prudence. Under his direction the circus grew in size and prestige, until becoming the largest in the country. Three monumental tents painted in stripes replaced the modest stall of bad times, various cages housed a traveling zoo of trained beasts, and other fantasy vehicles transported artists, including the only hermaphrodite and ventriloquist dwarf in history. An exact replica of the caravel of Christopher Columbus transported on wheels, completed the Great Fortunato International Circus. This huge caravan was no longer sailing adrift, as it had done before with grandfather, but it was going in a straight line along the main roads from the Rio Grande to the Strait of Magellan, stopping only in the big cities, where it entered with such scandal of drums, elephants and clowns, with the caravel to the head as a prodigious memory of the Conquest, that no one was left without knowing that the circus had arrived.

Fortunato II married a trapeze artist and with her he had a son whom they named Horacio. The woman stayed in a place of passage, determined to become independent from her husband and maintain herself through her uncertain trade, leaving the child with her father. From it prevailed a diffuse memory in the mind of his son, who could not separate the image of his mother from the many acrobats he met in his life. When he was ten years old, his father married another circus performer, this time with an equitable woman capable of balancing her head on a galloping animal or jumping from one rump to another with her eyes blindfolded. It was very beautiful. No matter how much water, soap and perfumes he used, he could not remove a trace of horse smell, a dry scent of sweat and exertion. In his magnificent lap little Horacio, wrapped in that unique smell, found comfort in the absence of his mother. But with time the equerry also left without saying goodbye. In his maturity, Fortunato married a Swiss woman who was getting to know America on a tourist bus. He was tired of his existence as a Bedouin and felt old for new shocks, so that when she asked him, he did not have the slightest inconvenience in changing the circus for a sedentary destination and ended up installed in a farm in the Alps, between hills and mountains, forests

bucolic His son Horacio, who was already in his twenties, was left in charge of the company.

Horacio had grown up in the uncertainty of changing places every day, always sleeping on wheels and living under a tent, but he felt very comfortable with his luck. He did not at all envy other creatures

who went gray in uniform to school and had their destinies traced from before they were born. By contrast, he felt powerful and free. He knew all the secrets of the circus and with the same casual attitude cleaned the excrements of wild beasts or rocked fifty meters high dressed as a hussar, seducing the audience with his dolphin smile. If at some point he yearned for some stability, he did not admit it or sleep. The experience of having been abandoned, first by the mother and then by the stepmother, made him distrustful, especially of the women, but he did not become a cynic, because of the grandfather he had inherited a sentimental heart. He had an immense circus talent, but more than art he was interested in the commercial aspect of the business. Ever since he was a child he set out to be rich, with the naïve intention of obtaining with money the security he did not get in his family. Multiplied the tentacles of the company buying a chain of boxing stadiums in several capitals. From boxing he went naturally to wrestling and as he was a man of playful imagination, he transformed that rude sport into a dramatic spectacle. His initiatives were the Mummy, which was presented in the ring inside an Egyptian sarcophagus; Tarzan, covering his impudence with a skin of tiger so small that at each jump of the fighter the public held his breath while waiting for some revelation; the Angel, who bet his golden hair and every night he lost it under the scissors of the ferocious Kuramoto—a Mapuche Indian disguised as a samurai—to reappear the next day with his curls intact, irrefutable proof of his divine condition. These and other commercial adventures, as well as his public appearances with a pair of bodyguards, whose role was to intimidate his competitors and sting the curiosity of women, gave him a bad man's prestige, which he celebrated with great rejoicing. He led a good life, traveled the world shutting deals and looking for monsters, appeared in clubs and casinos, owned a crystal mansion in California and a ranch in Yucatan, but lived most of the year in rich hotels. I enjoyed the company of rental blondes. He chose them soft and fruity breasts, as a tribute to the memory of his stepmother, but did not grieve too much for love affairs and when his grandfather asked him to marry and cast children to the world so that the surname of the Fortunato did not disintegrate without heir, he replied that no insane would go to the matrimonial scaffold. He was a dark-haired man with a mane combed to the cheek, naughty eyes and an authoritative voice, which accentuated his cheerful vulgarity. He was preoccupied with elegance and bought himself duke's clothes, but his suits were a little bright, the ties somewhat audacious, the ruby of his ring too ostentatious, his fragrance very penetrating. He had the heart of a lion tamer and no English tailor could conceal it.

This man, who had spent much of his life rampaging through the air with his waste, crossed on a Tuesday in March with Patricia Zimmerman and the inconsequence of spirit and clarity of thought was over. He was in the only restaurant in this city where blacks still do not enter, with four buddies and a diva whom he planned to take for a week to the Bahamas, when Patricia entered the room on her husband's arm, dressed in silk and adorned with some of those diamonds that made the Zimmerman and Cía. Nothing more different from his unforgettable stepmother smelling of horse sweat or complacent blondes, than that woman. He saw her move forward, small, thin, the bones of the neckline the sight and brown hair pulled back in a severe bun, and she felt heavy knees and an unbearable burning in her chest. He preferred to females simple and well arranged for the party and that woman had to look closely to assess their virtues, and even then they would only be visible to an eye trained in appreciating subtleties, which was not the case of Horacio Fortunato. If the seer of her circus had consulted her crystal ball to prophesy that she would fall in love at the first glance of a fortyish and haughty aristocrat, she would have laughed heartily, but that same thing happened when she saw her move in her direction like the shadow of some old Empress Dowager, in her dark garb and with the lights of all those diamonds glistening on her neck. Patricia passed by him and for a moment stopped before that giant with the napkin hanging from his

vest and a trace of sauce at the corner of his mouth. Horacio Fortunato managed to perceive his perfume and appreciate his aquiline profile and completely forgot about the diva, the bodyguards, business and all the purposes of his life, and decided in all seriousness to snatch that woman from the jeweler to love her in the best way possible. She placed her chair on her side and, ignoring her guests, set about measuring the distance that separated her from her, while Patricia Zimmerman wondered if that stranger was examining her jewels with some twisted design.

That same night a huge bouquet of orchids arrived at the Zimmerman residence. Patricia looked at the card, a sepia rectangle with a novel name written in golden arabesques. Bad taste, he muttered, guessing right away that it was the slick guy in the restaurant and ordered to put the gift on the street in the hope that the sender would be around the house and find out the whereabouts of its flowers. The next day they brought a crystal box with a single perfect rose, without a card. The butler also placed it in the trash. The rest of the week they delivered different bouquets: a basket with wild flowers on a bed of lavender, a pyramid of white carnations in a silver cup, a dozen black tulips imported from Holland and other varieties impossible to find in this hot land. All had the same fate as the first, but that did not discourage the beau, whose stalking became so unbearable that Patricia Zimmerman did not dare to answer the phone for fear of hearing his voice whispering indecencies, as happened on Tuesday at two o'clock. the dawn. He returned his closed letters. He stopped going because he found Fortunato in unexpected places: observing her from the neighboring box at the opera, in the street ready to open the car door before his driver managed to sketch the gesture, materializing as an illusion in an elevator or in some stairs I was imprisoned in your house, scared. It will pass, it will pass, it would repeat itself, but Fortunato did not dissipate like a bad dream, he was still there, on the other side of the walls, snorting. The woman thought to call the police or resort to her husband, but her horror of the scandal prevented her. One morning he was attending to his correspondence, when the butler announced the visit of the president of the company Fortunato e Hijos.

- In my own house, how dare you? Patricia murmured with a heart gallop. He needed to use the implacable discipline acquired in so many years of acting in salons, to hide the trembling of his hands and his voice. For a moment she was tempted to face that demented once and for all, but she realized that her strength would fail, she felt defeated before seeing him.

- Tell him I'm not here Show him the door and let employees know that gentleman is not welcome in this house, "he ordered.

The next day there were no exotic flowers at breakfast and Patricia thought, with a sigh of relief or disdain, that the man had finally understood his message. That morning she felt free for the first time in the week and left to play tennis and the beauty salon. He returned at two in the afternoon with a new haircut and a severe headache. Upon entering, he saw on the lobby table a purple velvet case with the Zimmerman mark printed in gold letters. She opened it somewhat distracted, imagining that her husband had left it there, and found a necklace of emeralds accompanied by one of those elaborate sepia cards, which he had learned to know and to detest. The headache was transformed into panic. That adventurer seemed willing to ruin his existence, not only bought his own husband a jewel impossible to disguise, but also sent it with all self-confidence home. This time it was not possible to throw the gift in the trash like the rumors of flowers received until then. With the case pressed against his chest he locked himself in his desk. Half an hour later he called the driver and sent him to deliver a package to the same address where he had returned several letters. When she let go of the jewel, she felt no relief, on the contrary, she felt as if she was sinking into a swamp.

But for that date Horacio Fortunato was also walking through a quagmire, without moving forward one step, groping his way around. He had never needed so much time and money to woo a woman, although it was also true, he admitted, that until then they were all different from this one. He felt ridiculous for the first time in his life as a mountebank, he could not continue like this for long, his bull health began to suffer, he slept soundly, the air was running out in his chest, his heart was racing, he felt fire in him. the stomach and bells at the temples. His businesses also suffered the impact of his love affliction, he made hasty decisions and lost money. Damn it, I do not know who I am anymore or where I'm standing, damn it, I grumbled in sweat, but not for a moment considered the possibility of abandoning the hunt.

With the purple case back in his hands, knocked down in an armchair at the hotel where he was staying, Fortunato remembered his grandfather. He rarely thought of his father, but he often recalled that formidable grandfather who, in his nineties, still cultivated his vegetables. He picked up the phone and requested a long distance communication.

Old Fortunato was almost deaf and he could not assimilate the mechanism of that devilish device that brought him voices from the other side of the planet, but the age had not lost his lucidity. He listened as best as he could to the sad story of his grandson, without interrupting until the end.

"So that bitch is giving herself the luxury of making fun of my boy, huh? - He does not even look at me, Nono. She is rich, beautiful, noble, has everything.

-Ajá ... and also has a husband. -Also, but that's the least of it. If only he would let me talk to him! - Talk to him? And for what? There's nothing to tell a woman like that, son.

-I gave him a queen necklace and he returned it without a single word. -Give him something he does not have.

-For example? - A good reason to laugh, that never fails with women - and Grandpa fell asleep with the receiver in his hand, dreaming of the maidens who loved him when he performed deadly stunts on the trapeze and danced with his monkey.

The next day the jeweler Zimmerman received in his office a splendid young man, a manicurist by profession, as he explained, who came to offer him for half the price the same necklace of emeralds that he had sold forty-eight hours before. The jeweler remembered the buyer very well, impossible to forget, a boastful lout. "I need a jewel capable of knocking over the defenses of an arrogant lady," he had said. Zimmerman reviewed him in a second and decided that he must be one of those new rich of oil or cocaine. He had no humor for vulgarities, he was used to other kinds of people. Seldom did he attend to the clients himself, but that man had insisted on talking to him and seemed willing to spend without hesitation.

-What do you recommend? he had asked before the tray where his most valuable clothes shone. - Depends on the lady. Rubies and pearls look good on dark skin, emeralds on lighter skin, diamonds are always perfect.

-He has too many diamonds. Her husband gives them as candy. Zimmerman coughed. He disliked that kind of confidences. The man took the necklace, raised it to the light without any respect, shook it like a rattle and the air was filled with tinkling and green sparks, while the jeweler's ulcer jumped. -

Do you think that emeralds bring good luck? "I suppose all precious stones meet that requirement, sir, but I'm not superstitious. -This is a very special woman. I can not go wrong with the gift, do you understand? - Perfectly. But apparently that's what happened, Zimmerman told himself without

being able to avoid a sarcastic smile, when that girl brought him back the necklace. No, there was nothing wrong with the jewel, it was her that was a mistake. I had imagined a more refined woman, in no case a manicurist with that plastic bag and that ordinary blouse, but the girl intrigued him, there was something vulnerable and pathetic in her, poor thing, she will not have a good ending in that bandit's hands, she thought. .

"Better tell me everything, daughter," Ziminerman said finally. The girl released the story she had memorized and an hour later left the office with a light step. As he had planned from the beginning, the jeweler had not only bought the necklace, but had also invited her to dinner.

It was easy for him to realize that Zimmerman was one of those shrewd and suspicious men for business, but naive for everything else and that it would be easy to keep him distracted by the time Horacio Fortunato needed and was willing to pay.

P, sa was a memorable night for Zimnierman, who had counted on a dinner and found himself living an unexpected passion. The next day he went back to see his new friend and told him over the weekend that he was stuttering Patricia, who was leaving for New York for a few days at an auction of Russian jewels, saved from the Yekaterinburg massacre. His wife paid no attention to him.

Alone in her house, without the courage to go out and with that headache that came and went without giving her rest, Patricia decided to dedicate Saturday to recover strength. He settled on the terrace to browse some fashion magazines. It had not rained all week and the air was dry and dense. He read for a while until the sun began to numb her, her body weighed, her eyes closed and the magazine fell from her hands. In that a rumor came from the back of the garden and he thought of the gardener, a stubborn guy who, in less than a year, had transformed his property into a tropical jungle, ripping out his chrysanthemum beds to give way to overflowing vegetation. She opened her eyes, looked out at the sun and noticed that something of unusual size was moving in the avocado cup. He removed his dark glasses and sat up. There was no doubt, a shadow was shaking up there and it was not part of the foliage.

Patricia Zimmerman left the chair and took a couple of steps, then she could clearly see a ghost dressed in blue with a golden cape that flew several meters high, gave a somersault in the air and for a moment seemed to stop at the gesture of greeting her from the sky. She stifled a scream, sure that the apparition would fall like a stone and disintegrate when it touched earth, but the cloak inflated and that radiant coleopter stretched out her arms and clung to a medlar neighbor. Immediately another blue figure appeared hanging from the legs in the cup of the other tree, swinging by the dolls to a girl crowned with flowers. The first trapeze artist made a sign and the second one threw him to the creature, who managed to release a shower of paper butterflies before being caught by the ankles. Patricia did not manage to move while in the heights flew those silent birds with layers of gold.

Suddenly a scream filled the garden, a long and barbaric scream that distracted Patricia from the trapeze artists. He saw a thick rope fall down a side wall of the property and there Tarzan descended in person, the same as the matinee in the cinema and the comics of his childhood, with his miserable loincloth of tiger skin and an authentic monkey sitting in his hip, hugging him by the waist. The King of the Jungle landed gracefully, hit his chest with his fists and repeated the visceral bellow, attracting all the employees of the house, who rushed to the terrace. Patricia ordered them with a gesture to stay still, while Tarzan's voice died down to give way to a gloomy roll of drums announcing a group of four Egyptians advancing on their sides, head and feet twisted, followed by a hunchback with striped hood, who was dragging a black panther to the end of a chain. Then two monks appeared, carrying a sarcophagus and an angel with long golden hair behind, and an Indian dressed as a Japanese, in a robe and perched on wooden skates, closed the procession. Everyone stopped behind the pool. The monks deposited the coffin on the

lawn, and while the Vestals hummed in some dead language and the Angel and Kuramoto wore their prodigious musculature, the lid of the sarcophagus was lifted and a nightmarish being emerged from within. When he was standing, with all his bandages in sight, it was evident that it was a mummy in perfect health. At that moment, Tarzan gave another howl and, without any provocation, he began to jump around the Egyptians and shake the ape. The Mummy lost its millennial patience, raised an arm and dropped it like a club in the back of the savage, leaving it inert with its face buried in the grass. The mummy climbed screaming to a tree. Before the embalmed pharaoh liquidated Tarzan with a second blow, he stood up and roared on him. Both rolled knotted in an unlikely position, until the panther was released and then all ran to find shelter among the plants and the employees of the house flew to get into the kitchen. Patricia was about to throw herself into the pool, when a guy in a tailcoat and top hat appeared, who with a loud whip stopped the cat in its tracks and left it on the ground purring like a cat with all four legs in the air, which allowed the hunchback to retrieve the chain, while the other removed his hat and extracted a meringue cake from inside, which he brought to the terrace and deposited at the feet of the hostess.

In the back of the garden appeared the others of the comparsa: the musicians of the band playing military marches, the clowns spanking their heads, the dwarves of the Medieval Courts, the horsewoman standing on her horse, the bearded woman, the dogs on bicycles, the ostrich dressed as a columbian and finally a row of boxers with their satin breeches and regulation gloves, pushing a platform with wheels topped by a painted cardboard arch. And there, on that podium of emperor of props, was Horacio Fortunato with his hair crushed with glitter, his irrevocable gallant smile, standing under his triumphal portico, surrounded by his unheard-of circus, acclaimed by the trumpets and the cymbals of his own orchestra, the most arrogant, most in love and most devoted man in the world. Patricia laughed and went out to meet him.

TOSCA

Her father sat her at the piano at the age of five and at ten Maurizia Rugieri gave her first recital at the Club Garibaldi, dressed in pink organza and patent leather boots, before a benign audience, composed mostly of members of the Italian colony. At the end of the presentation, they placed several bouquets of flowers at his feet and the president of the club presented him with a commemorative plaque and a earthenware doll, adorned with ribbons and lace.

- We greet you, Maurizia Rugieri, as a precocious genius, a new Mozart. The great stages of the world await you, "he declared. The girl waited for the applause to stop and, over the proud cry of her mother, made her voice speak with unexpected arrogance.

-This is the last time I play the piano. What I want is to be a singer, "he announced and left the room, dragging the doll by one foot.

Once she recovered from the embarrassment, her father placed her in singing classes with a stern teacher, who for every false note gave her a blow to her hands, which did not kill the girl's enthusiasm for the opera. However, at the end of adolescence it was seen that he had a bird's voice, barely enough to lull an infant in the cradle, so he must have changed his soprano pretensions to a more banal fate. At the age of nineteen, she married Ezio Longo, a first-generation immigrant in the country, an architect without a title and a trade builder, who had set out to found an empire on cement and steel, and at the age of thirty-five he had almost consolidated it. .

Ezio Longo fell in love with Maurizia Rugieri with the same determination employed in sowing the capital with its buildings. He was short, with solid bones, a shooting animal neck, and an energetic and somewhat brutal face, with thick lips and black eyes. His work forced him to dress in rustic clothes and from so much being in the sun his skin was dark and crossed with furrows, like tanned leather. He was good-natured and generous, laughed easily and liked popular music and food abundantly and unceremoniously. Under that vulgar appearance was a refined soul and a delicacy that he could not translate into gestures or words. When he looked at Maurizia, sometimes his eyes filled with tears and his chest with an oppressive tenderness, which he concealed with a swat, suffocated with shame. It was impossible for him to express his feelings and he believed that by covering her with gifts and enduring with stoic patience his extravagant mood swings and his imaginary ailments, he would compensate for the flaws of her lover's repertoire. She provoked in him a peremptory desire, renewed each day with the ardor of the first encounters, he embraced it exacerbated, trying to bridge the chasm between the two, but all his passion crashed against the squeamishness of Maurizia, whose imagination remained feverish from readings. romantics and records by Verdi and Puccini. He fell asleep, overcome by the fatigue of the day, overwhelmed by nightmares of twisted walls and spiral staircases, and woke up at dawn to sit on the bed and watch his sleeping wife with such attention that he learned to guess his dreams. He would have given his life for her to respond to his feelings with equal intensity. He built an oversized mansion supported by columns, where the hodgepodge of styles and the profusion of ornaments confused the sense of direction, and where four servants worked tirelessly only to polish bronzes, polish the floors, clean the glass pellets of the lamps and shake furniture with golden legs and false Persian carpets imported from Spain. The house had a small amphitheater in the garden, with loudspeakers and stage lights, in which Maurizia Rugieri used to sing for her guests. Ezio would not have admitted or in a trance of death that he was incapable of appreciating those vacillating trills of sparrows, not only to not expose the gaps in their culture, but above all out of respect for the artistic inclinations of his wife. He was an optimistic and self-confident man, but when Maurizia announced that she was pregnant, he suddenly came to an

uncontrollable apprehension, felt that his heart was splitting like a melon, that there was no room for such happiness in this valley of tears. It occurred to him that some sudden catastrophe would disrupt his precarious paradise and he prepared to defend it against any interference.

The catastrophe was a medical student with whom Maurizia stumbled on a tram. By then the child had been born-a creature as vital as his father, who seemed immune to all harm, even to the evil eye-and the mother had already recovered her waist. The student sat next to Maurizia on the way to the center of the city, a thin and pale young man with the profile of a Roman statue. I was reading the Tosca score and whistling through my teeth an aria of the last act. She felt that all the midday sun was eternalizing on her cheeks and a sweat of anticipation soaked her bodice. Unable to avoid it, he hummed the words of the unfortunate Mario waving at dawn, before the firing squad ended his days. Thus, between two lines of the score, the romance began. The young man was called Leonardo Gómez and he was as enthusiastic about bel canto as Maurizia.

During the following months the student obtained his medical degree and she lived one by one all the tragedies of the opera and some of the universal literature, Don Jose was killed successively, tuberculosis, an Egyptian tomb, a dagger and poison, he loved singing in Italian, French and German, it was Aída, Carmen and Lucía de Lamermoor, and on each occasion Leonardo Gómez was the object of his immortal passion. In real life they shared a chaste love, which she longed to consummate without daring to take the initiative, and which he fought in her heart out of respect for Maurizia's married status. They saw each other in public places and sometimes linked their hands in the shadowy area of a park, exchanged notes signed by Tosca and Mario and naturally called Scarpia Ezio Longo, who was so grateful for the son, for his beautiful wife and for the goods granted by heaven, and so busy working to offer his family all the security possible, that had it not been for a neighbor who came to tell him the gossip that his wife was too much on a tram, he might never have known of what was happening behind his back.

Ezio Longo had prepared himself to face the contingency of a bankruptcy in his business, an illness and even an accident of his son, as he imagined in his worst moments of superstitious terror, but it had not occurred to him that a mellifluous student could snatch him away his wife in front of his nose. When he heard it, he almost laughed out loud, because of all the misfortunes, that seemed the easiest to solve, but after that first impulse, a blind rage upset his liver. She followed Maurizia to a discreet pastry shop, where she surprised her by drinking chocolate with her lover. He did not ask for explanations. He picked up his rival for the clothes, picked him up and threw him against the wall in the midst of a crash of broken china and shrieks from the clientele. Then he took his wife by the arm and took her to his car, one of the last Mercedes Benz imported into the country, before the Second World War ruined commercial relations with Germany. He locked her in the house and put two masons from her company in the care of the doors. Maurizia spent two days crying in bed, without speaking and without eating. In the meantime Ezio Longo had had time to meditate and the anger had turned into a dull frustration that brought to mind the abandonment of his childhood, the poverty of his youth, the loneliness of his existence and all that inexhaustible hunger for sweetheart who accompanied him until he met Maurizia Rugieri and believed he had conquered a goddess. On the third day he could not take it anymore and entered his wife's room.

-For our son, Maurizia, you must get those fantasies out of your head. I know I'm not very romantic, but if you help me, I can change. I am not a man to bear horns and I love you too much to let you go. If you give me the opportunity, I'll make you happy, I swear to you.
For all answer she turned against the wall and prolonged her fast two more days. Your husband returned.

-I would like to know what the fuck is what you lack in this world, to see if I can give it to you, he said, defeated.

-I need Leonardo. Without him I'm going to die. -It's okay. You can go with that whipper if you want, but you will never see our son again.

She packed her bags, dressed in muslin, put on a hat with a veil and called a rental car. Before leaving, he kissed the child sobbing and whispered in his ear that he would soon find him again. Ezio Longo - who in one week had lost six kilos and half his hair - took the creature from his arms.

Maurizia Rugieri arrived at the boarding house where his lover lived and found that he had left two days ago to work as a doctor in an oil camp, in one of those hot provinces, whose name evoked Indians and snakes. It was difficult for him to convince himself that he had left without saying goodbye, but he attributed it to the beating he received in the pastry shop, concluded that Leonardo was a poet and that the brutality of her husband must have baffled him. He settled in a hotel and in the following days he sent telegrams to every conceivable point. At last she managed to locate Leonardo Gómez to announce that he had renounced his only son, challenged his husband, society and God himself and that his decision to follow him in his destiny, until death separated them, was absolutely irrevocable.

The trip was a heavy expedition by train, by truck and in some parts by river. Maurizia had never left alone outside a thirty-block radius around her house, but neither the grandeur of the landscape nor the incalculable distances could frighten her. On the way she lost a couple of suitcases and her muslin dress was turned into a yellow dust cloth, but finally she came to the river crossing where Leonardo had to wait for her. When he got out of the vehicle he saw a canoe on the shore and there he ran with the shrouds of the veil flying behind him and his long hair escaping in the curls of his hat. But instead of his Mario, he found a black man with an explorer's helmet and two melancholy Indians with oars in their hands. It was late to retreat. He accepted the explanation that Dr. Gomez had had an emergency and got on the boat with the rest of his battered luggage, praying that those men were not bandits or cannibals. They were not, fortunately, and they took her safely through the water through an extensive wild and rugged territory, to the place where her lover was waiting for her. They were two hamlets, one of long common dormitories where the workers lived; and another, where the employees lived, which consisted of the offices of the company, twenty-five prefabricated houses brought in by plane from the United States, an absurd golf course and a pool of green water that every morning was full of huge toads, all surrounded of a metal fence with a gate guarded by two sentries. It was a camp of passing men, there existence revolved around that dark mud that emerged from the bottom of the earth like endless dragon vomit. In those solitudes there were no more women than some of the workers' fellow workers; the gringos and the foremen traveled to the city every three months to visit their families. The arrival of Dr. Gomez's wife, as they called her, "upset the routine for a few days, until they got used to seeing her walk with her veils, her umbrella and her dance shoes, like a character escaped from another story.

Maurizia Rugieri did not let the rudeness of those men or the heat of each day defeat her, she set out to live her destiny with greatness and almost succeeded. He turned Leonardo Gómez into the hero of his own melodrama, adorning it with utopian virtues and exalting to the dementia the quality of his love, without stopping to measure the response of his lover to know if he followed her at the same pace in that unbridled passionate career. If Leonardo Gómez showed signs of staying far behind, she attributed it to his shy nature and bad health, worsened by that cursed climate. In truth, so fragile he seemed, that she was finally cured of all her old discomforts to devote herself to taking care of him. I accompanied him to the primitive hospital and learned the duties of a nurse to help him. Treating victims of malaria or curing horrendous injuries from accidents in the wells seemed better than staying locked in her house, sitting

under a fan, reading for the hundredth time the same old magazines and romantic novels. Between syringes and dressings she could imagine herself as a heroine of the war, one of those brave women in the movies they sometimes saw in the camp club. He refused with a suicidal determination to perceive the deterioration of reality, determined to beautify every moment with words, before the impossibility of doing otherwise. He spoke of Leonardo Gómez-whom he continued to call Mario-as a saint dedicated to the service of humanity, and set himself the task of showing the world that both were the protagonists of an exceptional love, which ended up discouraging any employee of the Company that might have felt inflamed by the only white woman in the place. In the barbarity of the camp, Maurizia called her contact with nature and ignored the mosquitoes, the poisonous bugs, the iguanas, the hell of the day, the suffocation of the night and the fact that she could not venture alone beyond the gate. She was referring to her loneliness, her boredom and her natural desire to travel the city, dress in fashion, visit her friends and go to the theater, like a slight nostalgia. The only thing that could not change the name was the animal pain that doubled in two when remembering his son, so he chose not to mention it ever. Leonardo Gómez worked as a camp doctor for more than ten years, until the fevers and the weather wiped out his health. For a long time he had been inside the protective guards of the Oil Company, he did not have the courage to start in a more aggressive environment and, on the other hand, he still remembered the fury of Ezio Longo when he burst it against the wall, so he did not even consider the eventuality to return to the capital. He looked for another position in some lost corner where he could continue living in peace, and so one day he came to Agua Santa with his wife, his medical instruments and his opera records. It was the fifties and Maurizia Rugieri got off the bus dressed in fashion, with a narrow polka-dotted suit and a huge black straw hat, which he had commissioned by catalog to New York, something never seen in those parts. In any case, they welcomed them with the hospitality of the small towns and in less than twenty-four hours they all knew the legend of love of the newcomers. They called them Tosca and Mario, without having the slightest idea who those characters were, but Maurizia was in charge of letting them know. She left her nursing practice with Leonardo, formed a liturgical choir for the parish and offered the first singing recitals in the village. Mute astonished, the inhabitants of Agua Santa saw her transformed into Madame Butterfly on an improvised stage in the school, dressed in an outlandish dressing gown, some knitting sticks in the hairstyle, two plastic flowers in the ears and the painted face with white plaster, trilling with his bird voice. Nobody understood a word of the song, but when she got down on her knees and pulled out a kitchen knife, threatening to bury it in her stomach, the audience gave a cry of horror and a spectator rushed to dissuade her, snatched the gun from her hands and forced her to her feet. Immediately a long discussion arose about the reasons for the tragic determination of the Japanese lady, and all agreed that the American sailor who had left her was a soulless, but it was not worth dying for him, since life is long and there are many men in this world. The performance ended in revelry when a band that played some cumbias was improvised and people started dancing. To that memorable night other similar ones followed: song, death, explanation on the part of the soprano of the argument of the opera, public discussion and final celebration. Dr. Mario and Mrs. Tosca were two select members of the community, he was in charge of the health of all and she of cultural life and to inform about changes in fashion. He lived in a nice, cool house, half of which was occupied by the doctor's office. In the courtyard they had a blue and yellow macaw, which flew over their heads when they went for a walk in the plaza. It was known where the doctor or his wife were going because the bird always accompanied them two meters high, silently gliding with their great wings of a defaced animal. In Agua Santa they lived for many years, respected by the people, who pointed them out as an example of perfect love.

In one of those attacks the doctor was lost in the roads of fever and could not return. His death moved the people. They feared that his wife would commit a fatal act, with, or so many that he had performed singing, so they took turns accompanying her day and night during the following weeks. Maurizia Rugieri dressed in mourning from head to toe, painted all the furniture in the house black and dragged his pain like a tenacious shadow that marked his face with two deep grooves next to his mouth, but he did not try to put an end to his lifetime. Perhaps in the privacy of her room, when she was alone in bed, she felt a deep relief because she no longer had to keep pulling the heavy wagon of her dreams, it was no longer necessary to keep the invented person alive to represent herself, nor continue to juggle to disguise the weaknesses of a lover who never lived up to his illusions. But the habit of the theater was too rooted. With the same infinite patience with which an image of a romantic heroine was created before, in widowhood she built the legend of her grief. He stayed in Agua Santa, always dressed in black, although the mourning was not used for a long time, and refused to sing again, despite the pleas of his friends, who thought that the opera could give comfort. The people tightened the circle around her, like a strong hug, to make her life tolerable and to help her in her memories. With the complicity of all, the image of Dr. Gómez grew in the popular imagination. Two years later they made a collection to make a bronze bust that they placed on a column in the square, in front of the stone statue of the liberator.

That same year they opened the highway that passed in front of Agua Santa, altering forever the appearance and mood of the town. At the beginning people opposed the project, believing that they would remove the poor inmates of the Santa María Prison to put them, shackled, to cut trees and chop stones, as the grandparents said that the road had been built at the time of the dictatorship of the Benefactor but soon the city engineers arrived with the news that the work would be done by modern machines, instead of the prisoners. Behind them came the surveyors and then the crews of workers with orange helmets and vests that shone in the darkness. The machines turned out to be iron-sized moles the size of a dinosaur, according to calculations by the school teacher, on whose flanks the name of the school was painted company, Ezjo Longo and Son. That same Friday, the father and son arrived in Agua Santa to review the works and pay the workers.

Seeing the signs and machines of her former husband, Maurizia Rugieri hid in her house with closed doors and windows, with the insane hope of staying out of reach of her past. But for twenty-eight years he had endured the memory of his absent son, like a pain stuck in the center of his body, and when he knew that the owners of the construction company were in Agua Santa having lunch in the tavern, he could not keep fighting against his instinct. He looked in the mirror. She was a fifty-one-year-old woman, aged by the tropical sun and trying to feign chimerical happiness, but her features still maintained the nobility of pride. She brushed her hair and combed it into a high bun, without trying to hide her gray hair, she put on her best black dress and the pearl necklace of her wedding, saved from so many adventures, and in a gesture of shy coquetry she put on a touch of black pencil on the eyes and carmine on the cheeks and on the lips. He left his home protecting himself from the sun with the umbrella of Leonardo Gómez. Sweat ran down his back, but he was not shaking anymore.

At that time the shutters of the tavern were closed to avoid the midday heat, so Maurizia Rugieri needed a long time to adjust her eyes to the gloom and distinguish Ezjo Longo and the man in one of the tables in the back. young man who should be his son. Her husband had changed much less than her, perhaps because he was always a person without age. The same lion's neck, the same solid skeleton, the same awkward features and sunken eyes, but now softened by a fan of cheerful wrinkles produced by

good humor. Leaning over his plate, he chewed enthusiastically, listening to the son's talk. Maurizia watched them from afar. His son had to be around thirty. Although she had long bones and delicate skin, gestures were those of her father, she ate with equal pleasure, hit the table to emphasize her words, laughed heartily, was a vital and energetic man, with a sense categorical of his own strength, well prepared for the fight. Maurizia looked at Ezio Longo with new eyes and saw for the first time his massive masculine virtues. She took a couple of steps forward, moved, with the air stuck in her chest, seeing herself from another dimension, as if she were on a stage representing the most dramatic moment of the long theater that had been her existence, with the names of her husband and son on their lips and the best disposition to be forgiven for so many years of abandonment. In that couple of minutes he saw the meticulous gears of the trap he had gotten into during three decades of hallucinations. He understood that the true hero of the novel was Ezio Longo, and he wanted to believe that he had continued to desire and wait for all those years with the persistent and passionate love that Leonardo Gómez could never give him because it was not in his nature.

At that moment, when a single step more would have taken her out of the area of the shadow and put in evidence, the young man bent down, grabbed his father's wrist and said something with a sympathetic wink. The two erupted in laughter, clapping their arms, messing with each other's hair, with a virile tenderness and a firm complicity of which Maurizia Rugieri and the rest of the world were excluded. She hesitated for an infinite moment on the border between reality and dream, then stepped back, left the tavern, opened her black umbrella and returned home with the macaw flying overhead, like a quirky calendar archangel.

WILIMAI

The name my father gave me is Walimai, which in the language of our brothers in the north means wind. I can tell you, because now you are like my own daughter and you have my permission to name me, although only when we are in family. One must be very careful with the names of people and living beings, because when they are pronounced their heart is touched and we enter within their vital force. That's how we greet each other as blood relatives. I do not understand the facility of foreigners to call each other without fear, which is not only disrespectful, it can also cause serious dangers. I have noticed that these people speak with the greatest lightness, without taking into account that to speak is also to be. The gesture and the word are the thoughts of man. It should not be spoken in vain, that I have taught my children, but my advice is not always heard. In the past taboos and traditions were respected. My grandparents and my grandparents' grandparents received the necessary knowledge from their grandparents. Nothing changed for them. A man with a good teaching could remember each of the received teachings and thus knew how to act at all times. But then the foreigners came speaking against the wisdom of the elders and pushing us out of our land. We go deeper and deeper into the jungle, but they always reach us, sometimes they take years, but finally they arrive again and then we must destroy the crops, throw the children on our backs, tie the animals and leave. So it has been since I remember: leave everything and run like mice and not as great warriors and gods that populated this territory in antiquity. Some young people are curious about whites and while we travel to the depths of the forest to continue living as our ancestors, others go the opposite way. We consider those who leave as if they were dead, because very few return and those who do have changed so much that we can not recognize them as relatives.

They say that in the years before my coming to the world, not enough females were born in our town and that's why my father had to travel long ways to find a wife in another tribe. He traveled through the woods, following the directions of others who traveled that route previously for the same reason, and who returned with foreign women. After a long time, when my father was beginning to lose hope of finding a mate, he saw a girl at the foot of a high waterfall, a river that fell from the sky. Without getting too close, in order not to scare her away, she spoke to him in the tone hunters use to reassure their prey, and explained their need to marry. She motioned him to approach, she observed him without dissimulation and must have pleased the aspect of the traveler, because he decided that the idea of marriage was not completely outlandish. My father had to work for his father-in-law until he paid her the value of the woman. After fulfilling the rites of the wedding, the two made the trip back to our village.

I grew up with my brothers under the trees, never seeing the sun. Sometimes a wounded tree fell and there was a hole in the deep dome of the forest, then we saw the blue eye of the sky. My parents told me stories, they sang songs to me and they taught me what men should know to survive without help, only with their bow and arrows. In this way I was free. We, the Children of the Moon, can not live without freedom. When we are enclosed between walls or bars we turn inward, we become blind and deaf and in a few days the spirit detaches itself from the bones of the chest and abandons us. Sometimes we become like miserable animals, but almost always we prefer to die that's why our houses do not have walls, only a sloping roof to stop the wind and divert the rain, under which we hang our hammocks close together, because we like to listen to the dreams of women and children and feel the breath of monkeys, dogs and limpets, that sleep under the same eaves. The first times I lived in the jungle without knowing that there was a world beyond cliffs and rivers. Sometimes visitors from other tribes came and told us rumors of Boa Vista and El Platanal, of foreigners and their customs, but we thought they were just stories to make people laugh. I became a man and it was my turn to get a wife, but I decided to wait

because I preferred to walk with singles, we were happy and had fun. However, I could not devote myself to play and rest like others, because my family is numerous: brothers, cousins, nephews, several mouths to feed, a lot of work for a hunter.

One day a group of pale men came to our village. They hunted with gunpowder, from afar, without dexterity or courage, they were unable to climb a tree or to stick a spear in the water, they could hardly move in the jungle, always entangled in their backpacks, their weapons and even their own feet. They did not wear air, like us, but they had soaked and smelly clothes, they were dirty and they did not know the rules of decency, but they were determined to tell us about their knowledge and their gods. We compared them with what they had told us about whites and we verified the truth of those gossip. We soon learned that these were not missionaries, soldiers or rubber pickers, they were crazy, they wanted the earth and to take away the wood, they were also looking for stones. We explained that the jungle can not be carried on its back and transported like a dead bird, but they did not want to hear reasons. They settled near our village. Each one of them was like a wind of catastrophe, destroyed everything it touched in its path, left a trail of waste, annoyed animals and people. At first we complied with the rules of courtesy and we gave them the pleasure, because they were our guests, but they were not satisfied with anything, they always wanted more, until, tired of those games, we started the war with all the usual ceremonies. They are not good warriors, they are easily frightened and have soft bones. They did not resist the clubbing we gave them in the head. After that we left the village and went to the east, where the forest is impenetrable, traveling great distances through the treetops so that our companions will not reach us. We had received the news that they are vengeful and that for every one of them that dies, even in a clean battle, they are capable of eliminating a whole tribe including children. We discovered a place to establish another village. It was not so good, the women had to walk for hours to look for clean water, but we stayed there because we believed that no one would look for us that far. After a year, on one occasion when I had to get away much following the trail of a cougar, I went too close to a soldiers' camp. I was fatigued and had not eaten in several days, that's why my understanding was stunned. Instead of turning around when I perceived the presence of foreign soldiers, I lay down to rest. The soldiers took me. However, they did not mention the blows to the others, they did not really ask me anything, maybe they did not know these people or they did not know that I am Walimai. They took me to work with the rubber workers, where there were many men from other tribes, who had been dressed in pants and forced to work, without considering their wishes at all. Rubber requires a lot of dedication and there were not enough people in those parts, that's why they had to bring us by force. That was a period without freedom and I do not want to talk about it. I stayed alone to see if I learned something, but from the beginning I knew I was going back to mine. Nobody can hold a warrior for too long against his will.

She was from the tribe of the Ila, the sweet-hearted ones, where the most delicate girls come from. Some men travel for months to get close to the Ila, bring them gifts and hunt for them, in the hope of getting one of their women. I recognized her despite her lizard aspect, because my mother was also an Ila. She was naked on a mat, tied by the ankle with a chain fixed on the floor, lethargic, as if she had sucked the "yopo" of the acacia tree by the nose, had the smell of sick dogs and was wet with the dew of all the men who were on her before me. It was the size of a boy of a few years, his bones sounded like little stones in the river. The women remove all the hair from the body, even the eyelashes, decorate the ears with feathers and flowers, cross polished sticks on the cheeks and nose, paint drawings on the whole body with the red colors of the onoto, purple of the palm tree and carbon black. But she did not have any of that anymore. I left my machete on the floor and greeted it as a sister, imitating some bird songs and the noise of the rivers. She did not answer. I hit his chest hard, to see if his spirit resonated between the

ribs, but there was no echo, his soul was very weak and could not answer me. Squatting beside her, I gave her a drink of water and spoke it in my mother's tongue. She opened her eyes and looked long. I understood.

First of all I washed without wasting the clean water. I took a good sip to my mouth and threw it in thin jets against my hands, which I rotated well and then soaked to clean my face. I did the same with her, to remove the dew from the men. I took off the pants that the foreman had given me. From the rope around my waist hung my sticks to make fire, some arrowheads, my tobacco roll, my wooden knife with a rat tooth on the end and a firm leather bag, where I had a bit of curare. I put some of that paste on the end of my knife, I bent over the woman and with the poisoned instrument I opened a cut in the neck. Life is a gift from the gods. The hunter kills to feed his family, he tries not to taste the flesh of his prey and prefers what another hunter offers him. Sometimes, unfortunately, a man kills another in war, but he can never harm a woman or a child. She looked at me with big eyes, yellow as honey, and I think she tried to smile gratefully. For her I had violated the first taboo of the Children of the Moon and I would have to pay my shame with many works of atonement. I put my ear to his mouth and she murmured his name. I repeated it twice in my mind to be sure but without saying it out loud, because the dead should not be mentioned so as not to disturb their peace, and she was already there, even if her heart still beat. Soon I saw that the muscles of his belly, chest and limbs were paralyzed, he lost his breath, he changed color, a sigh escaped and his body died without a fight, as small creatures die.

Immediately I felt that the spirit was coming out of his nose and was entering me, clinging to my sternum. All of her weight fell on me and I had to make an effort to stand up, I moved awkwardly, as if I were underwater. I folded his body in the position of the last rest, with knees touching the chin, I tied it with the ropes of the mat, I made a pile with the remains of the straw and used my sticks to make fire. When I saw that the fire was burning securely, I left the hut slowly, climbed the fence of the camp with great difficulty, because she was dragging me down, and I went to the forest. I had reached the first trees when I heard the alarm bells.

The whole first day I walked without stopping for a moment. On the second day I made a bow and arrows and with them I was able to hunt for her and also for myself. The warrior who carries the weight of another human life must fast for ten days, thus weakening the spirit of the deceased, who finally detaches himself and goes to the territory of the souls. If he does not, the spirit grows fatter with the food and grows inside the man until he suffocates it. I've seen some brave liver die like this. But before meeting those requirements, I had to lead the woman's spirit to the darkest vegetation, where it was never found. I ate very little, barely enough not to kill her a second time. Every bite in my mouth tasted like rotten meat and every sip of water was bitter, but I forced myself to swallow to nourish both of us. During a full turn of the moon I entered the jungle inside carrying the soul of the woman, who each day weighed more. We talk a lot. The language of the Ila is free and resounds under the trees with a long echo. We communicate by singing, with the whole body, with the eyes, with the waist, the feet. I repeated the legends that I learned from my mother and my father, I told him my past and she told me the first part of his, when she was a happy girl who played with her brothers to wallow in the mud and swing from the highest branches. Out of courtesy, he did not mention his last time of misery and humiliation. I caught a white bird, I plucked the best feathers and I made ornaments for the ears. At night she kept a small fire lit so that she was not cold and so that jaguars and snakes would not disturb her dream. I bathed her carefully in the river, rubbing it with ashes and crushed flowers to take away the bad memories.

Finally one day we arrived at the precise place and we had no more excuses to continue walking. There the jungle was so dense that in some places I had to break through to vegetation with my machete

and even with my teeth, and we had to speak in a low voice, so as not to disturb the silence of time. I chose a place near a thread of water, I raised a roof of leaves and made a hammock for her with three long pieces of bark. With my knife I shaved my head and started my fast.

During the time we walked together, the woman and I loved each other so much that we no longer wanted to separate, but man does not own life, not even his own, so I had to fulfill my obligation. For many days I did not put anything in my mouth, just a few sips of water. As the strength weakened, she broke away from my embrace, and her spirit, more and more ethereal, no longer weighed me as before. Five days later she took her first steps around while I was dozing, but I was not ready to continue her journey alone and she returned to my side. He repeated these excursions several times, moving away each time a little more. The pain of her departure was as terrible to me as a burn and I had to resort to all the courage learned from my father not to call her by her name aloud, thus attracting her back to me forever.

At twelve days I dreamed that she was flying like a toucan over the treetops and I woke up with a very light body and with a desire to cry. She had definitely left. I took my weapons and walked many hours until I reached an arm of the river. I submerged myself in water up to my waist, skewered a small fish with a sharp stick and swallowed it whole, with scales and tail. I immediately vomited it with a little blood, as it should be. I did not feel sad anymore. I learned then that sometimes death is more powerful than love. Then I went hunting to not return to my village empty-handed.

ESTER LUCERO

They took Ester Lucero on a makeshift stretcher, bleeding like an ox, his dark eyes wide with terror. Upon seeing her, Dr. Ángel Sánchez lost her proverbial calm for the first time and it was no wonder, because he was in love with her from the day he saw her, when she was still a child. At that time she still did not let go of her wrists and he, on the other hand, returned a thousand years old from his last Glorious Campaign. He came to the village at the head of his column, sitting on the roof of a truck, with a rifle on his knees, a beard of months and a bullet lodged forever in the groin, but as happy as it was before or after. He saw the girl waving a red paper flag, in the middle of the crowd cheering the liberators. At that time he was thirty years old and she was around twelve, but Ángel Sánchez guessed, by the firm alabaster bones and the depth of the girl's gaze, the beauty that was secretly brewing. He watched her from the top of his vehicle, convinced that it was a vision provoked by the fever of the swamps and the enthusiasm of victory, but as that night he found no consolation in the arms of the fleeting bride that he had in turn, he understood that he had to go out looking for that creature, at least to verify its mirage condition. The next day, when the street riots of the celebration subsided and the task of ordering the world and sweeping the rubble of the dictatorship began, Sánchez went out to tour the town. His first idea was to visit the schools, but he learned that they were closed since the last battle, so he had to knock on the doors one by one. After several days of patient pilgrimage, and when he thought that the girl had been a deception of his exhausted heart, he arrived at a tiny house painted blue and with his front pierced with bullets, whose only window was opened to the street without more protection than floral curtains. He called several times without getting an answer, then decided to enter. The interior was a unique room, poorly furnished, fresh and in gloom. He crossed the room, opened a door and found himself in a large courtyard burdened with junk and knickknacks, with a hammock hanging under a handle, a trough for washing, a chicken coop in the background and a profusion of tin jars and clay pots where they grew herbs, vegetables and flowers. There he finally found who he thought he had dreamed. Ester Lucero was barefoot, in an ordinary linen dress, her tuft of hairs tied at the nape of her neck with a string of shoes, helping her grandmother to hang clothes in the sun. When they saw him they both recoiled in an instinctive gesture, because they had learned to distrust whoever was wearing boots.

- "Do not be scared, I'm a partner." - He introduced himself with the greasy beret on his hand. From that day on, Ángel Sánchez simply wished Ester Lucero in silence, ashamed of that unspeakable passion for an impudent girl. For it refused to go to the capital when the booty of the power was distributed, and preferred to remain in charge of the only hospital in that forgotten town. He did not aspire to consummate love beyond the scope of his own imagination. She lived of tiny satisfactions: seeing her go to school, taking care of her when she got measles, providing her with vitamins during the years when milk, eggs and meat were only enough for the little ones and the rest had to settle for bananas and corn, visit her in her patio, where she would sit in a chair and show her the multiplication tables in front of her grandmother's watchful eye. Ester Lucero ended up calling him uncle for lack of a more appropriate name, and the old woman, accepting his presence as another of the inexplicable mysteries of the Revolution.

- What interest can an educated man, doctor, hospital head and hero of the homeland, in the talk of an old woman and the silence of her granddaughter? asked the village gossips.

In the following years, the girl flourished as it almost always happens, but Angel Sanchez believed that in his case it was a kind of prodigy and that only he could see the beauty that matured hidden under the innocent dresses made by the grandmother in his machine. sew. He was sure that in his wake the senses of the person who saw her would be disturbed, just as it was with his family, that is why he was surprised that he did not find a whirlwind of suitors around Ester Lucero. He lived tormented by overwhelming feelings: precise jealousy of all men, a perennial melancholy-the fruit of despair-and the fever of hell that haunted him at the time of nap, when he imagined the girl naked and wet, calling him with obscene gestures between the shadows of the room. No one ever knew of their stormy moods. The control he exercised over himself became second nature and thus acquired the reputation of a good man. At last the village matrons got tired of looking for a girlfriend and ended up accepting that the doctor was a bit strange.

- "They do not look like a fagot," - they concluded, "but perhaps malaria or the bullet in his crotch took away forever the taste for women. Ángel Sánchez cursed his mother, who had brought him into the world twenty years too early, and his destiny, which had sown his body and soul with so many scars. She prayed that some whim of nature would twist the harmony and dim the light of Ester Lucero, so that nobody would suspect that she was the most beautiful woman in this world and of any other. That's why on a fateful Thursday, when they took her to the hospital on a stretcher with her grandmother marching ahead and a procession of curious people behind, the doctor gave a visceral cry. When he pulled back the sheet and saw the young woman pierced by a horrific wound, he thought that by so desiring that she never belonged to another man, he had provoked that catastrophe.

"He climbed on the patio handle, slipped and fell on the stake where we tied the goose," said Grandmother.

Poor thing, she was traversed like a vampire. It was not easy to get rid of, "said a neighbor who helped transport the stretcher.

- Keep praying, I'll be back in fifteen minutes! he shouted as he passed. Ten years before, when Ángel Sánchez was marching with his companions through the jungle, with the vegetation up to his knees and the inconsolable torture of the mosquitoes and the heat, cornered, crossing the country in all directions to ambush the soldiers of the dictatorship, when they were nothing more than a handful of crazy visionaries with their belts stuffed with bullets, the backpack of poems and the head of ideals, when they had not smelled a woman for a few months or when they had been throwing soap on their bodies, and fear was a second skin and the only thing that kept them moving was despair, when they saw enemies everywhere and mistrusted even their own shadows, then Negro Rivas fell down a ravine and rolled eight meters into the abyss, crashing noiselessly, like a bag of rags. His companions needed twenty minutes to descend with ropes between sharp stones and twisted trunks, and find him submerged in the bushes, and almost two hours to hoist it, soaking in blood.

Negro Rivas, a brave and cheerful man, with the song always ready on his lips and willing to throw himself on the shoulder of another weaker fighter, was open like a grenade, with ribs in the air and a deep gash that began in the back and it ended in the middle of the chest. Sanchez carried his briefcase for emergencies, but that escaped completely from his modest resources. Without the least hope, he sutured the wound, bandaged it with strips of cloth, and administered the available medicines. They

placed the man on a piece of canvas stretched between two sticks and transported it, taking turns to carry it, until it was evident that each jolt was a minute less than life, because Negro Rivas oozed like a spring and delirious with iguanas with breasts woman and hurricanes of salt. They were planning to camp to let him die in peace, when someone spotted on the edge of a well of black water, two Indians who loosed themselves amicably. A little further on, sunk in the dense fog of the forest, was the village. It was a tribe immobilized at a remote age, with no more contact with this century than some daring missionary who went to preach unsuccessfully the laws of God and, what is more serious, without ever having heard of the insurrection or having heard the cry of Fatherland Or death. Despite these differences and the language barrier, the Indians understood that these exhausted men did not represent a greater danger and gave them a timid welcome. The rebels pointed to the dying man. The one who seemed to be the leader led them to a hut in eternal gloom, where floated a pestilence of urine and mud. There they laid the Negro Rivas on a mat, surrounded by his companions and the entire tribe. Soon the wizard arrived in ceremonial attire. The commander was shocked to see his necklaces of peonies, his fanatical eyes and the crust of dirt on his body, but Angel Sanchez explained that very little could be done for the wounded and whatever the sorcerer achieved - even if only help him die - it was better than nothing. The commander ordered his men to lower their weapons and keep silent, so that this strange half-naked sage could exercise his trade without distraction.

Two hours later the fever had disappeared and Negro Rivas could swallow water. The next day the curandero returned and repeated the treatment. At dusk the patient was sitting eating a thick corn gruel and two days later he tried his first steps around, with the wound in the process of healing. While the other guerrillas accompanied the progress of the convalescent, Angel Sanchez toured the area with the sorcerer gathering plants in his bag. Years later, Negro Rivas became Police Chief in the capital and only remembered that he was about to die when he took off his shirt to embrace a new woman, who invariably asked him about that long dress that split him in two.

-If the Negro Rivas was saved by an Indian in balls, I will save Ester Lucero, even if I have to make a pact with the devil -concluded Ángel Sánchez as he went around his house in search of the herbs he had kept for all those years and which, until that moment, he had completely forgotten. He found them wrapped in a newspaper, dry and brittle, at the bottom of a ramshackle trunk, next to his notebook of verses, his beret and other memories of the war.

The doctor returned to the hospital running like a chased man, under the heat of lead that melted the asphalt. He jumped up the stairs and burst into Ester Lucero's room soaked in sweat. The grandmother and the nurse on duty watched him pass by and approached the peephole. They watched him take off his white coat, cotton shirt, dark pants, socks purchased from contraband, and rubber-soled shoes that he always wore. Horrified, they saw him also take off his underpants and get hides, like a recruit.

-Holy Mary, mother of God! Grandma exclaimed. Through the small window of the door they could see the doctor when he moved the bed to the center of the room and, after placing both hands on the head of Ester Lucero for a few seconds, began a frantic dance around the patient. He raised his knees until he touched his chest, made deep inclinations, waved his arms and made grotesque morises, without losing even for an instant the inner rhythm that put wings on his feet. And for half an hour he did not stop dancing like a fool, dodging oxygen cylinders and serum bottles. Then he took some dried leaves from the pocket of his robe, placed them in a basin, crushed them with his fist until they were reduced to a thick

powder, spit on them abundantly, mixed everything together to form a paste and approached the dying woman. The women saw him remove the bandages and, as the nurse reported in his report, smear the wound with that disgusting mixture, without any consideration for the laws of asepsis or for the fact that he exhibited his nakedness. After the cure, the man fell on the floor, totally exhausted, but illuminated by a smile of a saint.

If Dr. Ángel Sánchez had not been the director of the hospital and an undisputed hero of the Revolution, they would have put a straitjacket on him and sent him to the asylum without further ado. But nobody dared to break down the door that he locked with the bolt, and when the mayor made the decision to do it with the help of the firemen, fourteen hours had passed and Ester Lucero was sitting on the stretcher, with her eyes open, contemplating his uncle Angel, who had once again stripped off his clothes and started the second stage of the treatment with new ritual dances. Two days later, when the commission arrived from the Ministry of Health sent specially from the capital, the sick woman was walking along the corridor on her grandmother's arm, all the people paraded through the third floor to see the resuscitated girl and the director of the hospital, dressed with impeccable correctness, he received his colleagues behind his desk. The commission refrained from asking details about the unusual dances of the doctor and devoted his attention to inquiring about the wonderful plants of the sorcerer.

It's been a few years since Ester Lucero fell off the handle. The young woman married an atmospheric inspector and went to live in the capital, where she gave birth to a girl with alabaster bones and dark eyes. His uncle Angel sends him from time to time nostalgic cards dotted with orthographic horrors. The Ministry of Health has organized four expeditions to search for marvelous herbs in the jungle, without any success. The vegetation swallowed up the indigenous village and with it the hope of a scientific medicine against irremediable accidents.

Dr. Ángel Sánchez has been left alone, with no company other than the image of Ester Lucero who visits him in his room at siesta time, burning his soul in a perpetual bacchanalia. The prestige of the doctor has greatly increased throughout the region, because they hear him speak with the stars in aboriginal languages.

Maria, the fool, believed in love. That made her a living legend. All the neighbors went to his funeral, even the policemen and the blind man from the kiosk, who rarely left his business. The Republic Street was empty, and in a sign of mourning they hung black ribbons on the balconies and put out the red lanterns of the houses. Each person has its history and in that neighborhood they are almost always sad, stories of accumulated poverty and injustice, of violence suffered, of children who died before being born and of lovers who leave, but that of María was different, she had an elegant shine that the imagination of others began to fly. He managed to exercise his trade alone, administering himself without noise, discreetly. He never had the slightest curiosity about alcohol or drugs, he was not even interested in the consolations of five pesos sold by the fortune-tellers and prophets of the neighborhood. He seemed safe from the torments of hope, protected by the quality of his invented love. She was a harmless-looking little woman, short in stature, features and fine gestures, all meekness and gentleness, but the times a pimp tried to put her hand on her she found a drooling fierce, pure claws and fangs, ready to return every blow, that's how his life went. They learned to leave her alone. While the other women spent their lives hiding bruises under thick layers of cheap makeup, she aged respected, with a certain air of queen in rags. He had no awareness of the prestige of his name or the legend they had embroidered at her expense. She was an old prostitute with the soul of a maid.

In her memories they insistently included a murderous trunk and a dark man with the smell of the sea, and so her friends discovered, one by one, the fragments of her life and united them with patience,

adding what was lacking with fantasy resources, until reconstructing a past . She was not, of course, like the other women in that place. He came from a remote world, where the skin is paler and Castilian has a resounding accent, hard consonants. He was born to a great lady, that deducted the other women because of his refined way of speaking and his strange manners, and if there was any doubt, when he died he dissipated it. He left with dignity intact. She had no known illness, she was not scared, she did not breathe through her ears like the common dying, she simply announced that she could no longer bear the tedium of being alive, she put on her party dress, she painted her lips red and opened the curtains of rubber that gave access to his room, so that everyone could accompany her.

"Now it's time to die" was his only explanation. He leaned back on his bed, his back resting on three cushions, with starched covers for the occasion, and drank without breathing a large carafe of thick chocolate. The other women laughed, but when there was no way to wake her four hours later, they understood that their decision was absolute and they spread the word about the neighborhood. Some came only out of curiosity, but most appeared with real affliction, staying there to accompany her. Her friends strained coffee to offer the visitors, because they thought it was in bad taste to serve liquor, lest they confuse that with a celebration. At about six o'clock in the afternoon, Maria suffered a shudder, opened her eyelids, looked around without distinguishing the faces and immediately left this world.

That was it. Someone suggested that maybe he had swallowed poison with the chocolate, in which case everyone would be guilty for not taking it to the hospital on time, but nobody paid attention to such slander. - If Maria decided to leave, she was in her right, because she did not have children or parents to take care of - the lady of the house declared.

They did not want to watch her in a funeral establishment, because the premeditated silence of her death was a solemn event in the street Republic and it was just that her last hours before going down to earth passed in the environment where she had lived and not as a foreigner whose Nobody wants to take charge. There were opinions about whether veiling dead in that house would bring bad luck to the soul of the deceased or those of the clients, and in case they broke a mirror to surround the coffin and brought holy water from the seminary chapel, to splash around the corners . That night we did not work on the premises, there was no music or laughter, but there were no tears either. They installed the drawer on a table in the living room, the neighbors lent chairs and there the visitors settled down to drink coffee and talk in low voices. In the center was Maria with her head resting on a satin cushion, her hands crossed and her dead child's photo on her chest. During the course of the night the skin tone changed, until it was as dark as chocolate.

I learned about Maria's story during those long hours when we watched her coffin. Her companions told that she was born during the First War, in a province in the south of the continent, where the trees lose their leaves in the middle of the year and the cold cools the bones. She was the daughter of a superb family of Spanish emigrants. Upon reviewing their piece they found in a box of cookies some brittle and yellow papers, including a birth certificate, photographs and letters. His father owned a hacienda and, according to a newspaper clipping faded by time, his mother had been a pianist before getting married. When Maria was twelve years old, she crossed a train crossing distractedly and was run over by a freight train. They rescued her between the rails without apparent damage, she had only a few scratches and she had lost her hat. However, soon after, everyone could see that the impact had transported the girl to a state of innocence from which she would never return. He forgot even the school rudiments learned before the accident, he barely remembered some piano lessons and the use of the sewing needle, and when they spoke to him, he remained absent. What he did not forget, however, were the rules of urbanity, which he kept intact until his last day.

Mary came to the marriage bed with the mind of a child, although her body had matured and was already that of a woman. The train swept away his natural curiosity, but he could not destroy the impatience of his senses. I only had what I learned from observing the animals on the farm, I knew that cold water is good for separating the dogs that stay stuck during intercourse and that the rooster sponges the feathers and cackles when you want to step on the hen, but not found adequate use for that data. On his wedding night he saw a trembling old man in a flannel robe, open, and something unforeseen under his navel move in his direction. The surprise caused him a constipation which he did not dare to talk about and when he began to swell like a balloon, he drank a bottle of Water of the Margarita - an anti-scrupulous and restorative remedy, which in many cases served as a purge - as a result of which she spent twenty-two days sitting in the pot, so decomposed that she almost lost some vital organs, but that did not have the faculty to deflate her. Soon she could no longer button her dresses and in due time gave birth to a blond child. After a month in bed, feeding on chicken broth and two liters of milk a day, she got up stronger and more lucid than she ever was in her life. She seemed cured of her state of perennial sleepwalking and even had the courage to buy elegant clothes; However, he did not manage to show off his new trousseau, because Mr. Guevara suffered a sudden attack and died sitting in the dining room, with the soup spoon in his hand. Maria resigned herself to wearing mourning costumes and veiled hats, buried in a ragged grave. So she spent two years in black, weaving jackets for the poor, entertaining with her lapdogs and her son, whom she combed with curls and dressed as a girl, as it appears in one of the portraits found in the cookie box, where You can see it sitting on a bear skin and illuminated by a supernatural ray.

For the widow time stopped in a perpetual instant, the air of the rooms remained unchanged, with the same old smell that her husband left. She continued to live in the same house, cared for by loyal servants and watched closely by her parents and siblings, who took turns visiting her daily, supervising her expenses and making even minor decisions. The seasons passed, the leaves of the trees fell in the garden and the hummingbirds of the summer reappeared, with no change in their routine. Sometimes she wondered the cause of her black dresses, because she had forgotten the decrepit husband who on a couple of occasions held her weakly among the linen sheets, then, repentant of his lust, throw himself at the feet of the Madonna and whip her a horse whip From time to time she opened the closet to shake off her dresses and could not resist the temptation to shed her dark clothes and to sneak proof of the jewel-embroidered robes, the leather stoles, the satin shoes and the kid gloves. He looked at himself in the triple moon of the mirror and greeted that woman dressed up for a dance in which he found it hard to recognize himself. After two years of solitude the rumor of the blood boiling in his body became intolerable. On Sundays at the door of the church she was delayed to watch the men go by, attracted by the husky sound of their voices, their shaved cheeks and the smell of tobacco. With dissimulation he lifted the veil of the hat and smiled at them. His father and his brothers soon warned him and, convinced that this American land corrupted even the decency of the widows, they decided in family council send it to some uncles in Spain, where without a doubt would be safe from frivolous temptations, protected by the solid traditions and the power of the Church. Thus began the journey that would change the destiny of Mary, the fool.

Her parents embarked her on a transatlantic accompanied by her son, a maid and the lap dogs. The complicated luggage included, in addition to the furniture in Maria's room and her piano, a cow that was in the ship's bay, to provide the child with fresh milk. Among many suitcases and hat boxes, he also carried a huge chest with bronze rivets and rivets, which contained the party dresses salvaged from the naphthalene. The family did not think that in the house of the uncles Maria had any opportunity to use them, but they did not want to contradict it. The first three days the traveler could not leave her bunk,

overcome by dizziness, but finally got used to the bobbing of the boat and got up. Then he called the maid to help him unpack the clothes for the long journey.

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Several days after the tragedy, Maria left with an uncertain step to take a breath for the first time on the deck. It was a warm night and from the bottom of the sea rose an unsettling smell of seaweed, shellfish, submerged ships, which entered his nostrils and ran through his veins with the effect of a telluric jolt. He was looking at the horizon, his mind blank and his skin bristling from the heels to the nape of his neck, when he heard an insistent whistle and when he turned around, he discovered two floors below, a silhouette lighted by the moon, beckoning to him. She went down the steps in a trance, approached the dark man who called her, submissively let go of the veils and robes of mourning and accompanied him behind a roll of ropes. Beaten by an impact similar to that of the train, he learned in less than three minutes the difference between an old husband, finished by the fear of God, and an insatiable Greek sailor burning for the shortage of several weeks of oceanic chastity. Dazed, the woman discovered her own possibilities, dried up the crying and asked for more. They spent part of the night getting to know each other and only parted when they heard the emergency siren, a terrible bellow of shipwreck that altered the silence of the fish. Thinking that the inconsolable mother had thrown herself into the sea, the maid had sounded the alarm and the whole crew, except for the Greek, was looking for her.

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Time, poverty and the effort of deceiving the disappointment destroyed the freshness of Mary. His skin turned brownish, he thinned to the bone and for comfort he cut his hair like a prisoner, but he maintained his elegant manners and the same enthusiasm for every encounter with a man, because he did not see in them anonymous subjects, but the reflection of herself in the arms of her imaginary lover. Confronted with reality, she was not able to perceive the sordid urgency of the companion on duty, because each time she surrendered herself with the same irrevocable love, going ahead, like a daring bride, to the desires of the other. With the age her memory was disordered, she talked crazy things and by the time she moved to the capital and settled down in the street República, she did not remember that she was once the muse inspiring so many verses improvised by navigators of all The races and was perplexed when someone traveled from the port to the city, just to see if there was still one who had heard in a place in Asia. When faced with that miserable grasshopper, that pile of pathetic bones, that little woman of nothing, and seeing the legend reduced to rubble, many turned around and left in astonishment, but others

remained in pity. They received an unexpected reward. Maria closed her rubber curtain and at the same time changed the quality of the air in the piece. Later the man left in awe, taking away the image of a mythological girl and not that of the pitiful old woman he thought he saw at first. Mary's past was erased-her only clear memory was the terror of trains and trunks-and if it had not been for the tenacity of her fellow workers, no one would have known her story. He lived waiting for the moment when the curtain of his room was opened to give way to the Greek sailor, or any other fantasy born of his fantasy, who would pick it up in the precise circle of his arms to return the shared delight on the deck of a ship on the high seas, always looking for the old illusion in each passing man, illuminated by an imaginary love, deceiving the shadows with fleeting embraces, with sparks that were consumed before they burned, and when he got bored of waiting in vain and felt that the soul was covered with scales, decided that it was better to leave this world. And with the same delicacy and consideration of all his actions, he then turned to the chocolate jug

SIMPLE MARIA

Maria, the fool, believed in love. That made her a living legend. All the neighbors went to his funeral, even the policemen and the blind man from the kiosk, who rarely left his business. The Republic Street was empty, and in a sign of mourning they hung black ribbons on the balconies and put out the red lanterns of the houses. Each person has its history and in that neighborhood they are almost always sad, stories of accumulated poverty and injustice, of violence suffered, of children who died before being born and of lovers who leave, but that of María was different, she had an elegant shine that the imagination of others began to fly. He managed to exercise his trade alone, administering himself without noise, discreetly. He never had the slightest curiosity about alcohol or drugs, he was not even interested in the consolations of five pesos sold by the fortune-tellers and prophets of the neighborhood. He seemed safe from the torments of hope, protected by the quality of his invented love. She was a harmless-looking little woman, short in stature, features and fine gestures, all meekness and gentleness, but the times a pimp tried to put her hand on her she found a drooling fierce, pure claws and fangs, ready to return every blow, that's how his life went. They learned to leave her alone. While the other women spent their lives hiding bruises under thick layers of cheap makeup, she aged respected, with a certain air of queen in rags. He had no awareness of the prestige of his name or the legend they had embroidered at her expense. She was an old prostitute with the soul of a maid.

In her memories they insistently included a murderous trunk and a dark man with the smell of the sea, and so her friends discovered, one by one, the fragments of her life and united them with patience, adding what was lacking with fantasy resources, until reconstructing a past. She was not, of course, like the other women in that place. He came from a remote world, where the skin is paler and Castilian has a resounding accent, hard consonants. He was born to a great lady, that deducted the other women because of his refined way of speaking and his strange manners, and if there was any doubt, when he died he dissipated it. He left with dignity intact. She had no known illness, she was not scared, she did not breathe through her ears like the common dying, she simply announced that she could no longer bear the tedium of being alive, she put on her party dress, she painted her lips red and opened the curtains of rubber that gave access to his room, so that everyone could accompany her.

"Now it's time to die" was his only explanation. He leaned back on his bed, his back resting on three cushions, with starched covers for the occasion, and drank without breathing a large carafe of thick chocolate. The other women laughed, but when there was no way to wake her four hours later, they understood that their decision was absolute and they spread the word about the neighborhood. Some came only out of curiosity, but most appeared with real affliction, staying there to accompany her. Her friends strained coffee to offer the visitors, because they thought it was in bad taste to serve liquor, lest they confuse that with a celebration. At about six o'clock in the afternoon, Maria suffered a shudder, opened her eyelids, looked around without distinguishing the faces and immediately left this world.

That was it. Someone suggested that maybe he had swallowed poison with the chocolate, in which case everyone would be guilty for not taking it to the hospital on time, but nobody paid attention to such slander. - If Maria decided to leave, she was in her right, because she did not have children or parents to take care of - the lady of the house declared.

They did not want to watch her in a funeral establishment, because the premeditated silence of her death was a solemn event in the street Republic and it was just that her last hours before going down to earth passed in the environment where she had lived and not as a foreigner whose Nobody wants to

take charge. There were opinions about whether veiling dead in that house would bring bad luck to the soul of the deceased or those of the clients, and in case they broke a mirror to surround the coffin and brought holy water from the seminary chapel, to splash around the corners. That night we did not work on the premises, there was no music or laughter, but there were no tears either. They installed the drawer on a table in the living room, the neighbors lent chairs and there the visitors settled down to drink coffee and talk in low voices. In the center was Maria with her head resting on a satin cushion, her hands crossed and her dead child's photo on her chest. During the course of the night the skin tone changed, until it was as dark as chocolate.

I learned about Maria's story during those long hours when we watched her coffin. Her companions told that she was born during the First War, in a province in the south of the continent, where the trees lose their leaves in the middle of the year and the cold cools the bones. She was the daughter of a superb family of Spanish emigrants. Upon reviewing their piece they found in a box of cookies some brittle and yellow papers, including a birth certificate, photographs and letters. His father owned a hacienda and, according to a newspaper clipping faded by time, his mother had been a pianist before getting married. When Maria was twelve years old, she crossed a train crossing distractedly and was run over by a freight train. They rescued her between the rails without apparent damage, she had only a few scratches and she had lost her hat. However, soon after, everyone could see that the impact had transported the girl to a state of innocence from which she would never return. He forgot even the school rudiments learned before the accident, he barely remembered some piano lessons and the use of the sewing needle, and when they spoke to him, he remained absent. What he did not forget, however, were the rules of urbanity, which he kept intact until his last day.

The blow of the locomotive left Mary incapacitated for reasoning, attention or resentment. She was, therefore, well equipped for happiness, but that was not her luck. At the age of sixteen, her parents, eager to pass on to another the burden of that somewhat delayed daughter, decided to marry her before the beauty faded, and chose a certain doctor Guevara, a man of retired life and ill-disposed for marriage, but he owed them some money and could not refuse when they suggested the link. That same year the wedding was celebrated in private, as befitted a lunatic girlfriend and a boyfriend several decades older.

Mary came to the marriage bed with the mind of a child, although her body had matured and was already that of a woman. The train swept away his natural curiosity, but he could not destroy the impatience of his senses. I only had what I learned from observing the animals on the farm, I knew that cold water is good for separating the dogs that stay stuck during intercourse and that the rooster sponges the feathers and cackles when you want to step on the hen, but not found adequate use for that data. On his wedding night he saw a trembling old man in a flannel robe, open, and something unforeseen under his navel move in his direction. The surprise caused him a constipation which he did not dare to talk about and when he began to swell like a balloon, he drank a bottle of Water of the Margarita - an anti-scrupulous and restorative remedy, which in many cases served as a purge - as a result of which she spent twenty-two days sitting in the pot, so decomposed that she almost lost some vital organs, but that did not have the faculty to deflate her. Soon he could not buttoning her dresses and in due time gave birth to a blond boy. After a month in bed, feeding on chicken broth and two liters of milk a day, she got up stronger and more lucid than she ever was in her life. She seemed cured of her state of perennial sleepwalking and even had the courage to buy elegant clothes; However, he did not manage to show off his new trousseau, because Mr. Guevara suffered a sudden attack and died sitting in the dining room, with the soup spoon in his hand. Maria resigned herself to wearing mourning costumes and veiled hats, buried in a ragged grave. So she spent two years in black, weaving jackets for the poor, entertaining with her

lapdogs and her son, whom she combed with curls and dressed as a girl, as it appears in one of the portraits found in the cookie box, where You can see it sitting on a bear skin and illuminated by a supernatural ray.

For the widow time stopped in a perpetual instant, the air of the rooms remained unchanged, with the same old smell that her husband left. She continued to live in the same house, cared for by loyal servants and watched closely by her parents and siblings, who took turns visiting her daily, supervising her expenses and making even minor decisions. The seasons passed, the leaves of the trees fell in the garden and the hummingbirds of the summer reappeared, with no change in their routine. Sometimes she wondered the cause of her black dresses, because she had forgotten the decrepit husband who on a couple of occasions held her weakly among the linen sheets, then, repentant of his lust, throw himself at the feet of the Madonna and whip her a horse whip From time to time she opened the closet to shake off her dresses and could not resist the temptation to shed her dark clothes and to sneak proof of the jewel-embroidered robes, the leather stoles, the satin shoes and the kid gloves. He looked at himself in the triple moon of the mirror and greeted that woman dressed up for a dance in which he found it hard to recognize himself.

After two years of solitude the rumor of the blood boiling in his body became intolerable. On Sundays at the door of the church she was delayed to watch the men go by, attracted by the husky sound of their voices, their shaved cheeks and the smell of tobacco. With dissimulation he lifted the veil of the hat and smiled at them. His father and his brothers soon warned him and, convinced that this American land corrupted even the decency of the widows, they decided in family council send it to some uncles in Spain, where without a doubt would be safe from frivolous temptations, protected by the solid traditions and the power of the Church. Thus began the journey that would change the destiny of Mary, the fool.

Her parents embarked her on a transatlantic accompanied by her son, a maid and the lap dogs. The complicated luggage included, in addition to the furniture in Maria's room and her piano, a cow that was in the ship's bay, to provide the child with fresh milk. Among many suitcases and hat boxes, he also carried a huge chest with bronze rivets and rivets, which contained the party dresses salvaged from the naphthalene. The family did not think that in the house of the uncles Maria had any opportunity to use them, but they did not want to contradict it. The first three days the traveler could not leave her bunk, overcome by dizziness, but finally got used to the bobbing of the boat and got up. Then he called the maid to help him unpack the clothes for the long journey.

The existence of Maria was marked by sudden misfortunes, like that train that snatched her spirit and launched her back to an irreversible childhood. He was arranging the dresses in the closet of his cabin, when the boy looked out at the open trunk. At that moment a shake of the ship slammed the heavy lid and the metallic edge gave the creature in the neck, untangling it. It took three sailors to detach the mother from the cursed trunk and a dose of laudanum capable of knocking down an athlete to prevent hair from being pulled out by strands and to smash her face with her nails. He spent hours howling and then entered a twilight state, rocking from side to side, as in the days when he gained the reputation of an idiot. The captain of the ship announced the unfortunate news by a loudspeaker, read a short answer and then ordered to wrap the small corpse with a flag and throw it overboard, because they were already in the middle of the ocean and had no way of preserving it until the next port.

Several days after the tragedy, Maria left with an uncertain step to take a breath for the first time on the deck. It was a warm night and from the bottom of the sea rose an unsettling smell of seaweed, shellfish, submerged ships, which entered his nostrils and ran through his veins with the effect of a telluric jolt. He was looking at the horizon, his mind blank and his skin bristling from the heels to the

nape of his neck, when he heard an insistent whistle and when he turned around, he discovered two floors below, a silhouette lighted by the moon, beckoning to him. She went down the steps in a trance, approached the dark man who called her, submissively let go of the veils and robes of mourning and accompanied him behind a roll of ropes. Beaten by an impact similar to that of the train, he learned in less than three minutes the difference between an old husband, finished by the fear of God, and an insatiable Greek sailor burning for the shortage of several weeks of oceanic chastity. Dazed, the woman discovered her own possibilities, dried up the crying and asked for more. They spent part of the night getting to know each other and only parted when they heard the emergency siren, a terrible bellow of shipwreck that altered the silence of the fish. Thinking that the inconsolable mother had thrown herself into the sea, the maid had sounded the alarm and the whole crew, except for the Greek, was looking for her.

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OUR SECRET

She allowed herself to be caressed, silent, drops of sweat on her waist, the smell of toasted sugar in her still body, as if she guessed that a single sound could rummage through memories and throw everything away, making dust that instant when he was a person like all, a casual lover he met in the morning, another man with no history attracted by her spiky hair, freckled skin or the deep rattle of her gypsy bracelets, another who approached her in the street and started walking with her without precise direction, commenting on time or traffic and observing the crowd, with that somewhat forced confidence of the compatriots in a strange land; a man without sadness, or grudges, or guilt, clean as ice, who simply wanted to spend the day with her wandering through bookstores and parks, drinking coffee, celebrating the chance of having met, talking about old nostalgia, about what life was like when both grew up in the same city, in the same neighborhood, when I was fourteen, you remember, the winters of shoes wet with frost and paraffin stoves, summers of peaches, back in the forbidden country. Perhaps she felt a little lonely or it seemed to her that it was an opportunity to make love without questions and for that reason, at the end of the afternoon, when there were no more excuses to keep walking, she took him by the hand and led him to his house. He shared with other exiles a sordid apartment, in a yellow building at the end of an alley full of garbage cans. His room was narrow, a mattress on the floor covered with a striped blanket, shelves made of planks supported by two rows of bricks, books, posters, clothes on a chair, a suitcase in a corner. There she took off her clothes without preamble with the attitude of a complacent girl.

He tried to love her. He walked with patience, sliding down its hills and hollows, unhurriedly approaching its routes, kneading it, soft clay on the sheets, until she surrendered, open. Then he stepped back with silent reserve. She turned to look for him, curled over the man's belly, hiding her face, as if engaged in modesty, while he felt it, licked it, whipped it. He wanted to abandon himself with his eyes closed and let her do it for a while, until he was defeated by sadness or shame and had to push her away. They lit another cigarette, there was no complicity, they had missed the anticipated urgency that united them during that day, and only two helpless creatures remained on the bed, with the memory absent, floating in the terrible void of so many silent words. When they met that morning, they did not aspire to anything extraordinary, they had not wanted much, just a little company and a little pleasure, nothing more, but at the time of the meeting the grief overcame them. We are tired, she smiled, apologizing for that grief installed between the two. In a last effort to gain time, he took the woman's face in his hands and kissed his eyelids. They lay side by side, holding hands, and spoke of their lives in that country where they happened to meet, a green and generous place where they would always be strangers. He thought about getting dressed and saying goodbye, before the tarantula of his nightmares poisoned the air, but he saw her young and vulnerable and wanted to be his friend. Friend, he thought, not lover, friend to share some moments of calm, without demands or commitments, friend not to be alone and to fight fear. He did not decide to leave or to let go of his hand. A warm, soft feeling, a tremendous compassion for himself and for her made his eyes burn. The curtain was inflated like a candle and she got up to close the window, imagining that the darkness could help them recover the desire to be together and the desire to embrace. But it was not like that, he needed that patch of light from the street, because if he did not feel trapped again in the abyss of the ninety centimeters without time of the cell, fermenting in their own excrement, demented. Leave the curtain open, I want to look at you, I lied to you, because you did not dare to confide your terror of the night, when you were thirsty again, the bandage tightened on your head like a crown of nails, the visions of caverns and the assault of so many ghosts. I could not talk about it, because one thing leads to the other and it ends up saying what has never been said. She went back to the bed, stroked it

without enthusiasm, ran her fingers through the small marks, exploring them. Do not worry, it's nothing contagious, it's just scars, he laughed almost in a sob. The girl sensed his anguished tone and stopped, the gesture suspended, alert. At that moment he must have told her that this was not the beginning of a new love, not even a fleeting passion, it was just a moment of truce, a brief minute of innocence, and that soon, when she fell asleep, he would go; He had to tell her there would be no plans for them, no furtive calls, they would not wander together hand in hand through the streets again, nor would they share games of lovers, but she could not speak, her voice was caught in her belly, like a paw. He knew he was sinking. He tried to retain the reality that was slipping away from him, to anchor his spirit in anything, in the disordered clothes on the chair, in the books stacked on the floor, in the poster of Chile on the wall, in the freshness of that Caribbean night, in the rumble of the street; He tried to concentrate on that offered body and think only of the girl's overflowing hair, in its sweet smell. She begged without voice that please help him save those seconds, while she watched him from the farthest corner of the bed, sitting like a fakir, her clear nipples and the eye of her navel looking at him too, registering her trembling, the clash of his teeth, the moan. The man heard the silence grow inside him, knew that his soul was breaking, as he had done so many times before, and stopped fighting, releasing the last hold on the present, rolling down an endless cliff. He felt the straps embedded in his ankles and wrists, the brutal discharge, the broken tendons, the insulting voices, demanding names, the unforgettable screams of Ana begged at his side and the others, hanging by the arms in the courtyard.

They stayed like that for a thousand years, until the hallucinations slowly receded and he returned to the room, to discover himself alive despite everything, breathing, beating, with her weight on his body, her head resting on his chest, His arms and legs over hers, two terrified orphans. And in that instant, as if she knew everything, she told him that fear is stronger than desire, love, hatred, guilt, anger, stronger than loyalty. Fear is something total, he concluded, tears streaming down his neck. Everything stopped for the man, touched in the most hidden wound. He sensed that she was not just a girl willing to make love out of commiseration, that she knew what was crouched beyond silence, of complete solitude, beyond the sealed box where he had hidden himself from the Colonel and his own treason, beyond the memory of Ana Díaz and the other betrayed companions, whom they were bringing one by one blindfolded. How can she know all that? The woman sat up. His thin arm was cut against the clear haze of the window, groping for the switch. He turned on the light and removed one by one the metal bracelets, which fell soundlessly on the bed. His hair was half-covering his face when he held out his hands. White scars crossed her wrists too. For an interminable moment he watched them immobile until he understood everything, love, and saw her tied with the straps on the electric grill, and then they could hug and cry, hungry for pacts and confidences, forbidden words, for promises of tomorrow, sharing, finally, the most secret, secret.

THE LITTLE HIEldbURD

So many years they danced together El Capitán and La Niña Eloísa, who reached perfection. Each could intuit the next movement of the other, guess the exact moment of the next round, interpret the subtlest pressure of the hand or deviation of a foot. They had not lost their step once in forty years, they moved with the precision of a couple used to making love and sleeping in close embrace, so it was so difficult to imagine that they had never crossed a single word.

The Little Heidelberg is a dance hall some distance from the capital, located on a hill surrounded by banana plantations, where in addition to good music and a less embarrassing air, offer an unusual aphrodisiac stew flavored with all kinds of species, too strong for the ardent climate of this region, but in perfect agreement with the traditions that inspired the owner, Don Rupert. Before the oil crisis, when people still lived in the illusion of abundance and imported fruits from other latitudes, the specialty of the house was the apple strudel, but after the oil remained only a hill of indestructible garbage and the memories of better times, make the strudel with guavas and mangoes. The tables, arranged in a wide circle that leaves a free space for dancing in the center, are covered with green and white checkered tablecloths and the walls show bucolic scenes of the Alpine country life: shepherdesses with yellow braids, stout young men and women. unpolluted cows. The musicians - dressed in shorts, wool socks, Tyrolean suspenders and felt hats, whose sweat has lost their appearance and look like greenish wigs from afar - stand on a platform crowned by an embalmed eagle, to which, according to Don Rupert says, new feathers come out from time to time. One plays the accordion, the other a sax and the third one manages with hands and feet to simultaneously sound the drums and cymbals. The accordion player is a master of his instrument and also sings with a warm tenor voice and a vague Andalusian accent. Despite his crazy attire of Swiss innkeeper is the favorite of the ladies assiduous to the room and several of them caress the secret fantasy of being trapped with him in some mortal adventure, for example, a landslide or a bombing, where they would exhale happy the last breath enveloped by those powerful arms, able to tear so heartrending the accordion. The fact that the average age of these ladies reaches seventy years does not inhibit the sensuality evoked by the singer, rather it adds the sweet breath of death. The orchestra begins its work after sunset and ends at midnight, except on Saturdays and Sundays, when the place fills with tourists and must continue until the last client leaves, at dawn. They only perform polkas, mazurkas, waltzes and regional dances from Europe, as if instead of being stuck in the Caribbean, Little Heidelberg was on the banks of the Rhine.

On Saturdays, around nine o'clock at night, when everyone has tasted their aphrodisiac stew and has abandoned the pleasure of dancing, La Mexicana appears and she feels alone. She is a provocative fifty-year-old woman with a galleon body - high keel, potbellied, broad aft, face of a figurehead - wearing a mature, but still turgid, neckline and a flower in her ear. She is not the only one dressed as a flamenco dancer, of course, but in her it is more natural than in the other ladies with white hair and a sad waist who do not even speak decent Spanish. The Mexican dancing the polka is a ship adrift in abrupt waves, but to the rhythm of the waltz it seems to slip in fresh water. That's how he sometimes glimpsed her in dreams. The Captain woke up with the almost forgotten restlessness of his adolescence. They say that El Capitán came from a Nordic fleet whose name nobody could decipher. He was an expert in ancient ships and sea routes, but all that knowledge lay buried deep in his mind, without the slightest possibility of being useful in the hot landscape of this region, where the sea is a placid aquarium of green and crystalline waters, inappropriate for the navigation of the intrepid ships of the North Sea. He was a tall, dry man, a tree without leaves, his back stiff and his neck muscles still firm, dressed in his jacket of gold buttons and

wrapped in that tragic aura of retired sailors. He never heard a word in Spanish or in any other known language. Thirty years ago Don Rupert said that El Capitan was surely Finnish, because of the ice color of his pupils and the irredeemable justice of his gaze, and as nobody could contradict it, they ended up accepting it. For the rest, in the Little Heidelberg the language does not matter, because nobody goes there to talk. Some rules of behavior have been modified, for the convenience and convenience of all. Anyone can go out on the track alone or invite someone from another table, and women also take the initiative to approach men, if they wish. It is a fair solution for widows without company. Nobody takes La Mexicana to dance, because it is understood that she would consider it offensive, and the knights must wait, trembling in anticipation, for her to do so. The woman deposits her cigar in the ashtray, uncovers the fierce columns of her legs, arranges her bodice, advances to the chosen one and is planted in front without a glance. He changes partners in each dance, but he used to reserve at least four pieces for El Capitán. He grabbed her around the waist with his firm helmsman's hand and guided her down the runway without allowing that his many years cut off his inspiration.

The oldest parishioner in the room, who in a half century did not miss even a Saturday at Little Heidelberg, was the Eloisa Girl, a tiny, soft and soft lady, with rice paper skin and a crown of transparent hair. For so long she made a living making chocolates in her kitchen, which the aroma of chocolate impregnated her completely and smelled like a birthday party. Despite his age, he still had some gestures of the first youth and was able to spend all night circling the dance floor without ruffling the curls of the bow or losing the rhythm of the heart. He had arrived in the country at the beginning of the century, coming from a village in the south of Russia, with his mother, who was then of dazzling beauty. They lived together making chocolates, totally alien to the rigors of climate, of the century and of loneliness, without husbands, without family, or great surprises, and without more fun than El Pequeño Heidelberg every weekend. Since her mother died, the Eloisa girl came alone. Don Rupert received her at the door with great deference and accompanied her to his table, while the orchestra welcomed him with the first chords of his favorite waltz. At some tables, jugs of beer were raised to greet her, because she was the oldest and undoubtedly the most beloved person. She was shy, she never dared to invite a man to dance, but in all those years she did not need to do it, because it was a privilege for anyone to take her hand, to tie it delicately around her waist so as not to break up some crystal bone and lead it. to the track. She was a graceful dancer and had that sweet fragrance capable of giving back to those who smelled her the best memories of her childhood.

The Captain sat alone, always at the same table, drank in moderation and never showed any enthusiasm for Dona Burgel's aphrodisiac stew. He followed the rhythm of the music with one foot and when the Niña Eloísa was free, he invited her, squaring him to the front with a discreet clash of heels and a slight inclination. They never talked, just looked and smiled between the gallops, escapes and diagonals of some old dance.

One Saturday in December, less humid than others, a couple of tourists arrived at the Little Heidelberg. This time it was not the disciplined Japanese of recent times, but tall Scandinavians, with toasted skin and pale hair, who settled on a table to watch the dancers fascinated. They were cheerful and noisy, they clashed beer mugs, they laughed happily and chatted loudly. The words of the foreigners reached the Captain at his table and from far away, from another time and another landscape, came the sound of his own language, whole and fresh, as newly invented, words that he had not heard for several decades, but that remained intact in his memory. An expression softened his old sailor's face, making him hesitate for a few minutes between the absolute reserve where he was comfortable and the almost forgotten delight of abandoning himself in a conversation. Finally he stood up and approached the

strangers. Behind the bar, Don Rupert observed the Captain, who was saying something to the newcomers, leaning slightly, hands behind his back. Soon the other clients, the girls and the musicians realized that this man was speaking for the first time since they knew him and they also stayed quiet to listen to him better. He had a great-grandfather's voice, cascading and slow, but he made a great determination in every sentence. When he finished taking out all the contents of his chest, there was such silence in the room that Dona Burgel left the kitchen to find out if anyone had died. Finally, after a long pause, one of the tourists shook his astonishment and called Don Rupert to tell him in primitive English, to help him translate the Captain's speech. The Norsemen followed the old sailor to the table where La Niña Eloísa waited and don

Rupert also approached, taking off his apron, with the intuition of a solemn event. The Captain said a few words in his language, one of the foreigners interpreted it in English and Don Rupert, with red ears and a tembleque mustache, repeated it in his crooked Spanish.

-Niña Eloísa, El Capitán asks if he wants to marry him. The fragile old woman sat with round eyes of surprise and her mouth hidden behind her cambric handkerchief, and everyone waited suspended in a sigh, until she managed to get her voice out.

"Do not you think this is a bit hasty?" He muttered. His words passed through the innkeeper and the tourists and the answer made the same route in reverse.

-The Captain says that he has waited forty years to tell him and that he could not wait until someone speaks his language again. He says please, answer him now.

"It's okay," the Eloisa girl whispered, and it was not necessary to translate the answer, because everyone understood her.

Don Rupert, euphoric, raised both arms and announced the commitment, The Captain kissed the cheeks of his girlfriend, tourists shook hands around the world, the musicians beat their instruments in a triumphant march and the attendees made a wheel in winch of the couple. The women wiped their tears, the men toasted excited, Don Rupert sat at the bar and hid his head in his arms, shaken by emotion, while Dona Burgel and her two daughters uncovered bottles of the best rum. Then the musicians played the waltz of the Blue Danube and everyone cleared the track.

The Captain took the soft woman who had loved without words for so long and led her to the center of the room, where they danced with the grace of two herons in their wedding dance. The Captain held her with the same loving care with which in his youth he caught the wind in the sails of some ethereal ship, leading her along the track as if they were rocking in the calm waves of a bay, while telling him in their language of blizzards and forests everything his heart had silenced until that moment. Dancing and dancing El Capitan felt that their age was receding and at each step they were happier and lighter. One lap after the other, the chords of the music more vibrant, the feet more, fast, the waist of her thinner, the weight of her small hand in his lighter, his more disembodied presence. Then he saw that the Eloisa girl was becoming lace, foam, fog, to be imperceptible and finally disappear altogether and he found himself spinning and spinning with empty arms, with no company but a faint scent of chocolate.

The tenor indicated to the musicians that they were prepared to continue playing the same waltz forever, because he understood that with the last note El Capitán would wake up from his reverie and the memory of the Niña Eloísa would definitely disappear. Moved, the old parishioners of Little Heidelberg remained motionless in their chairs, until at last La Mexicana, with her arrogance transformed into charitable tenderness, rose and moved discreetly towards the trembling hands of the Captain, to dance with him.

THE JUDGE'S WIFE

Nicolás Vidal always knew that he would lose his life for a woman. He was predicted on the day of his birth and confirmed by the owner of the store on the only occasion when he allowed him to see his fortune in the coffee shop, but he did not imagine that the cause would be Casilda, Judge Hidalgo's wife. He spotted her for the first time the day she came to town to get married. He did not find her attractive, because he preferred brazen, swarthy females, and that transparent young woman in her travel suit, with the fleeting look and fine fingers, useless to give pleasure to a man, was as inconsistent as a handful of ash. Knowing well his destiny, he took care of women and throughout his life he fled from all sentimental contact, drying his heart for love and limited to quick encounters to circumvent loneliness. So insignificant and remote was Casilda that he did not take precautions with her, and when the moment came she forgot the prediction that was always present in her decisions. From the roof of the building, where he had crouched with two of his men, he observed the young lady from the capital when she got out of the car on the day of her marriage. She arrived accompanied by half a dozen of her relatives, as livid and delicate as she was, who attended the ceremony fanning themselves with an air of frank consternation and then left to never return.

Like all the villagers, Vidal thought that the bride would not stand the weather and soon the comadres should dress her for her own funeral. In the unlikely event that she could resist the heat and dust that entered her skin and fixed her soul, she would undoubtedly succumb to her husband's bad humor and bachelor mania. Judge Hidalgo was twice her age and had been sleeping alone for so many years, he did not know where to begin to please a woman. Throughout the province they feared his severe temper and his stubbornness to keep the law, even at the expense of justice. In the exercise of his functions he ignored the reasons for good feeling, punishing with equal firmness the theft of a hen that the qualified homicide. He wore black rigorous so that everyone knew the dignity of his office, and despite the irreducible dust of that people without illusions always wore booties polished with beeswax. A man like that is not made for a husband, the gossips said, but the unfortunate omens of the wedding were not fulfilled, on the contrary, Casilda survived three consecutive births and seemed happy. On Sundays she went with her husband to the twelve o'clock mass, imperturbable under her Spanish mantilla, untouched by the inclemencies of that perennial summer, discolored and silent like a shadow. Nobody heard him more than a faint greeting, nor did he see more daring gestures than a nod or a fleeting smile, it seemed volatile, about to vanish in an oversight. It gave the impression of not existing, that's why everyone was surprised to see his influence on the Judge, whose changes were remarkable.

While Hidalgo continued to be the same in appearance, funereal and harsh, his decisions at the Court took a strange turn. In the public stupor, he released a boy who stole his employer, arguing that for three years the employer had paid less than what was fair and the money stolen was a form of compensation. He also refused to punish an adulterous wife, arguing that the husband had no moral authority to demand honesty, if he himself maintained a concubine. The malicious tongues of the people murmured that Judge Hidalgo turned around like a glove when he crossed the threshold of his house, took off his solemn robes, played with his children, laughed and sat Casilda on his knees, but those murmurings were never confirmed. Anyway, they attributed to his woman those acts of benevolence and his prestige improved, but none of that interested Nicolás Vidal, because he was outside the law and was certain that there would be no mercy for him when they could wear it in front of the Judge. He did not listen to the gossip about Dona Casilda and the few times he saw her from afar, he confirmed his first assessment that it was only a blurry ectoplasm.

Vidal had been born thirty years earlier in a windowless room of the only brothel in town, the son of Juana La Triste and of an unknown father. He had no place in this world and his mother knew it, so he tried to tear it from his belly with herbs, sail lines, bleach and other brutal resources, but the creature was determined to survive. Years later, Juana La Triste, seeing that son so different, realized that the drastic abortion systems that failed to eliminate him, instead tempered his body and soul to give him the hardness of iron. As soon as he was born, the midwife picked him up to look at him in the light of a lamp and immediately noticed that he had four nipples.

"Poor thing, he will lose his life for a woman," he predicted, guided by his experience in these matters.

Those words weighed like a deformity in the boy. Maybe his existence would have been less miserable with a woman's love. To compensate him for the numerous attempts to kill him before he was born, his mother chose for him a name full of beauty and a solid surname, chosen at random; but that name of prince was not enough to conjure the fatal signs and before the age of ten the boy had his face marked with a knife by the fights and very soon after he lived as a fugitive. At twenty he was the leader of a gang of desperate men. The habit of violence developed the strength of his muscles, the street made him ruthless and loneliness, to which he was condemned for fear of losing love, determined the expression of his eyes.

Any inhabitant of the town could swear to see him that he was the son of Juana La Triste, because like her, her pupils were watery with tears without spilling. Every time an offense was committed in the region, the guards went out with dogs to hunt down Nicolás Vidal to silence the protest of the citizens, but after a few laps through the hills they returned empty-handed. They did not really want to find him, because they could not fight him. The gang consolidated its bad name in such a way that the villages and haciendas paid a tribute to keep it away. With these donations, the men could rest easy, but Nicolás Vidal forced them to keep on horseback, in the midst of a storm of death and ruin so that they would not lose their taste for war or lose their prestige. Nobody dared to face them. On a couple of occasions Judge Hidalgo asked the Government to send army troops to reinforce his police, but after some useless excursions the soldiers returned to their barracks and the outlaws to their adventures. Only once was Nicolás Vidal about to fall into the trap of justice, but his inability to move him saved him. Tired of seeing the laws run over, Judge Hidalgo decided to ignore the scruples and prepare a trap for the bandit. He realized that in defense of justice he was going to commit an atrocious act, but of two evils he chose the least. The only bait that occurred to him was Juana La Triste, because Vidal did not have other relatives or knew him loves. He removed the woman from the premises, where she scrubbed floors and cleaned latrines in the absence of clients willing to pay for their services, put her in a custom-made cage and placed her in the center of the Plaza de Armas, with no more consolation than a jug of water.

-When you finish the water will start screaming. Then his son will appear and I'll be waiting for him with the soldiers," the judge said. The rumor of that punishment, in disuse since the time of the slaves cimarrones, reached

Nicolás Vidal's ears shortly before his mother drank the last sip of the pitcher. His men saw him receive the news in silence, without altering his impassive solitaire mask or the calm rhythm with which he sharpened his knife against a leather strap. He had not had contact with Juana La Triste for many years and he did not keep a single pleasant memory of his childhood, but that was not a sentimental matter, but a matter of honor. No man can endure such an offense, the bandits thought, as they readied their weapons and their mounts, ready to go to the ambush and leave their lives in it if necessary. But the boss did not show hurry.

As the hours passed, the tension in the group increased. They looked at each other sweating, not daring to comment, waiting impatiently, their hands on the grips of the revolvers, on the horse's mane, on the hilts of the bows. Night came and the only one who slept in the camp was Nicolás Vidal. At dawn, the opinions were divided among the men, some believed that he was much more heartless than they ever imagined and others that his boss planned spectacular action to rescue his mother. The only thing that nobody thought was that his courage could be lacking, because he had shown signs of having it in excess. At noon they could no longer bear the uncertainty and went to ask him what he was going to do.

"Nothing," he said. -And your mother? "We'll see who has more balls, the Judge or me," Nicolás Vidal replied imperturbably. On the third day, Juana La Triste no longer cried out for mercy or prayed for water, because her tongue had dried and the words died in her throat before she was born, she lay curled on the floor of her cage with her eyes lost and her lips swollen, moaning like an animal in moments of lucidity and dreaming of hell the rest of the time. Four armed guards guarded the prisoner to prevent neighbors from giving her a drink. Their laments occupied the whole town, they entered through the closed shutters, they were introduced by the wind through the doors, they remained attached to the corners, the dogs picked them up to repeat them howling, they infected the newborns and they ground the nerves of those who I listened The judge could not avoid the parade of people in the square sympathizing with the old woman, nor could stop the solidary strike of the prostitutes, which coincided with the fortnight of the miners. On Saturday the streets were taken by the rude miners, eager to spend their savings before returning to the ditches, but the town offered no entertainment other than the cage and that murmur of pity brought from mouth to mouth, from the river to the coast road. The priest led a group of parishioners who came before Judge Hidalgo to remind him of Christian charity and beg him to exempt that poor innocent woman from that martyr's death, but the magistrate put the latch on his office and refused to hear them, betting that Juana La Triste would endure another day and her son would fall into the trap. Then the notables of the town decided to go to Dona Casilda.

The Judge's wife received them in the gloomy living room of her house and listened to her reasons. Callada, with her eyes downcast, as was her style. Three days ago her husband was absent, locked in his office, awaiting Nicolás Vidal with a senseless determination. Without looking out the window, she knew everything that was happening on the street, because the noise of that long torment was also coming into the vast rooms of her house. Doña Casilda waited for the visitors to leave, dressed her children with Sunday clothes and left with them for the plaza. He had a basket with provisions and a jug of fresh water for Juana La Triste. The guards saw her appear around the corner and guessed her intentions, but they had precise orders, as well is that they crossed their rifles in front of her and when she wanted to move forward, observed by an expectant crowd, they took her by the arms to prevent him. Then the children started screaming.

Judge Hidalgo was in his office in front of the plaza. He was the only inhabitant of the neighborhood who had not plugged his ears with wax, because he remained attentive to the ambush, stalking the sound of Nicolás Vidal's horses. For three days with his nights he endured the crying of his victim and the insults of the mutinous neighbors before the building, but when he distinguished the voices of his children he understood that he had reached the limit of his resistance. Exhausted, he left his Court with a Wednesday beard, his eyes feverish with vigil and the weight of his defeat on his back. He crossed the street, entered the quadrangle of the square and approached his wife. They looked at each other sadly. It was the first time in seven years that she faced him and chose to do it in front of the whole town. Judge Hidalgo took the basket and the jar from Dona Casilda and he himself opened the cage to help his prisoner.

"I told you, he has less balls than I do," Nicolás Vidal laughed when he found out what had happened. But his laughter became bitter the next day, when they told him that Juana La Triste had hanged himself in the brothel lamp where he spent his life, because he could not resist the embarrassment of his only son leaving her in a cage in the center of the Plaza de Armas. _The Judge had his time, said Vidal. His plan was to enter the town at night, catch the magistrate by surprise, give him a spectacular death and place him inside the damn cage, so that when he woke up the next day everyone could see his remains humiliated. But he learned that the Hidalgo family had left for a seaside resort to pass the bad taste of defeat.

The hint that they were being persecuted for revenge reached Judge Hidalgo halfway, at an inn where they had stopped to rest. The place did not offer enough protection until the detachment of the guard came, but it had been a few hours ahead and his vehicle was faster than the horses. He calculated that he could reach the other town and get help. He ordered his wife to get into the car with the children, pressed down on the pedal and took to the road. He must have arrived with a wide margin of security, but it was written that Nicolás Vidal would meet that day with the woman from whom he had fled all his life.

Exhausted by the nights of sailing, the hostility of the neighbors, the embarrassment suffered and the tension of that race to save his family, the heart of Judge Hidalgo jumped and burst without noise. The car without control went out of the way, gave some stumbles and stopped at last on the side. Doña Casilda took a couple of minutes to realize what had happened. She had often put herself in the case of being a widow, for her husband was almost an old man, but he did not imagine that he would leave her at the mercy of his enemies. He did not stop to think about that, because he understood the need to act immediately to save the children. He looked around the place where he was and almost burst into tears, because in that bare expanse, burned by a merciless sun, there were no signs of human life, only the rugged hills and a sky bleached by the light. But with a second look he saw the shadow of a grotto on a slope, and there he ran, carrying two creatures in his arms and the third clinging to their skirts.

Casilda climbed three times, carrying her children one by one to the top. It was a natural cave, like many others in the mountains of that region. He checked the interior to make sure it was not an animal's hideout, arranged the children in the back and kissed them without a tear.

-Within a few hours the guards will come to look for them. Until then do not leave for no reason, even if you hear me scream, have you understood? -he ordered them. The little ones shrank in terror and with a last glance of goodbye the mother descended from the hill. She reached the car, lowered her husband's eyelids, brushed off her clothes, adjusted her hair, and sat down to wait. He did not know how many men the band of Nicolás Vidal was composed of, but he prayed that there would be many, that would give them a job to be satisfied with it, and he gathered his strength wondering how long it would take to die if he took pains to do it little by little. She wanted to be opulent and strong to resist them and gain time for her children.

He did not have to wait a long time. Soon he saw dust on the horizon, heard a gallop and gritted his teeth. Disconcerted, she saw that it was a single rider, who stopped a few meters from her with the gun in his hand. His face was marked with a knife and he recognized Nicolás Vidal, who had decided to go after Judge Hidalgo without his men, because that was a private matter that they had to arrange between the two. Then she understood that she should do something much harder than die slowly.

The villain had only one glance to understand that his enemy was safe from any punishment, sleeping his death in peace, but there his wife was floating in the reverberation of the light. He jumped off the horse and approached him. She did not lower her eyes or move and he stopped in surprise, because for the first time someone challenged him without fear. They measured themselves in silence for some eternal

seconds, gauging each other's strengths, estimating their own tenacity and accepting that they were facing a formidable adversary. Nicolás Vidal kept the revolver and Casilda smiled.

The woman of the judge won every moment of the following hours. He used all the resources of seduction recorded since the dawn of human knowledge and others that he improvised inspired by necessity, to offer that man the greatest pleasure. Not only did she work on her body as a skilled craftswoman, pulsing every fiber in search of pleasure, but she put the refinement of her spirit at the service of her cause. Both understood that they played their lives and that gave their encounter a terrible intensity. Nicolás Vidal had fled from love since his birth, he did not know the intimacy, the tenderness, the secret laughter, the feast of the senses, the joyful joy of the lovers. Every minute that passed, the detachment of guards and with them the firing squad came closer, but it also brought him closer to that prodigious woman and that is why he gave them with pleasure in exchange for the gifts that she offered him. Casilda was modest and shy and had been married to an austere old man who was never naked before. During that unforgettable afternoon she did not lose sight of the fact that her goal was to buy time, but at some point she abandoned herself, marveling at her own sensuality, and felt for that man something similar to gratitude. Therefore, when he heard the distant noise of the troops, he begged him to flee and hide in the hills. But Nicolás Vidal preferred to wrap her in his arms to kiss her for the last time, thus fulfilling the prophecy that marked his destiny.

THE NORTH'S ROAD

Claveles Picero and his grandfather, Jesús Dionisio.

Picero, it took thirty-eight days to cover the two hundred and seventy kilometers between his village and the capital. They crossed the lowlands on foot, where the humidity macerated the vegetation in an eternal broth of mud and sweat, climbed and lowered the hills between motionless iguanas and burdened palm trees, crossed the coffee plantations dodging foremen, lizards and snakes, walked under the leaves of tobacco between phosphorescent mosquitoes and sidereal butterflies. They went straight to the city, bordering the road, but on a couple of occasions they had to make long detours to avoid the soldiers' camps. Sometimes the truckers slowed down as they passed by, attracted by the mestiza queen's back and the girl's long black hair, but the old man's eyes immediately dissuaded them from any attempt to disturb her. The grandfather and his granddaughter had no money and did not know how to beg. When the supplies they had in a basket were finished, they went on at the point of pure courage. At night they wrapped themselves in their rebozos and slept under the trees with a Hail Mary on the lips and the soul placed on the child, not to think of pumas and poisonous vermin. They woke up covered in blue beetles. With the first signs of dawn, when the landscape remained enveloped by the last mists of the dream and still the men and beasts did not start the day's work, they started walking again to take advantage of the fresco. They entered the capital by the Camino de los Españoles, asking those who crossed the streets where they could find the Secretary of Social Welfare. By then Jesus Dionisio sounded all the bones and Claveles the colors of the dress had vanished, had the enchanted expression of a sleepwalker and a century of fatigue had spilled on the splendor of his twenties.

Jesus Dionisio was the best-known craftsman of the province, in his long life he had gained a prestige of which he did not boast, because he considered his talent as a gift in the service of God, of which he was only his administrator. He had started as a potter and still made clay pots, but his fame came from wooden saints and small sculptures in bottles, which the peasants bought for their domestic altars or were sold to tourists in the capital. It was a slow work, something of eye, time and heart, as the man explained to the children swirling around him to watch him work. He introduced the painted sticks into the bottles with pincers, with a point of glue on the parts he had to stick, and patiently waited for them to dry before putting the next piece. His specialty was the Calvarios: a large cross at the center where the carved Christ hung, with its nails, its crown of thorns and a halo of golden paper, and two more simple crosses for the thieves of Golgotha. At Christmas he made niches for the Child God, with pigeons representing the Holy Spirit and with stars and flowers to symbolize Glory. He could not read or sign his name because when he was a boy there was no school in those parts, but he could copy from the mass book some Latin phrases to decorate the pedestals of his saints. He said that his parents had taught him to respect the laws of the Church and the people, which was more valuable than having instruction. The art did not give him to maintain his house and rounded up his budget by raising roosters of race, fine for the fight. To each rooster he had to devote a lot of care to them, feed them in the beak with a porridge of crushed cereals and fresh blood, which he got in the slaughterhouse, he had to remove them by hand, air them the feathers, polish the spurs and train them daily so that they did not lack value when trying them. Sometimes I went to other towns to see them fight, but never bet, because for him all money won without sweat and work was a thing of the devil. On Saturday nights he went with his granddaughter Claveles to clean the church for the Sunday ceremony. The priest did not always reach the priest, who traveled the towns by bicycle, but the Christians gathered anyway to pray and sing. Jesus Dionysus was also in charge of collecting and keeping alms for the care of the temple and the help of the priest. Thirteen children had Picero with his wife, Amparo Medina, of whom five survived to childhood pest and accidents. When the

couple thought that the parenting had ended, because all the boys were adults and had left the house, the minor returned with permission from the Military Service bringing a bundle wrapped in rags and put it on Amparo's knees. When they opened it they saw that it was a newborn girl, half agonized by the lack of breast milk and by the crushing of the trip.

- Where did you get this, son? -asked Jesús Dionisio Picero. "Apparently it's the same blood of mine," replied the young man, not daring to hold his father's gaze, squeezing his uniform cap between his sweaty fingers. -And if it's not too much to ask, where did the mother go? -I don't know. He left the little girl at the door of the barracks with a written paper that the father is me. The sergeant sent me to deliver it to the nuns, he says there's no way to prove it's mine. But I feel sorry for myself, I do not want her to be an orphan ... -Where has a mother been seen abandoning her newly born child? -They are things in the city. -It must be, then. And what's the name of this poor thing? "As you baptize her, father, but if you ask me, I like Claveles, which was her mother's favorite flower.

Jesus Dionisio went to look for the goat to milk, while Amparo cleaned the baby with oil and prayed to the Virgin of the Grotto asking him to give her courage to take care of another child. Once he saw the child in good hands, the youngest son said goodbye gratefully, threw his bag over his shoulder and returned to the barracks to carry out his punishment.

Claveles grew up in his grandparents' house. She was a stubborn and rebellious girl, who was impossible to master by reason or with the exercise of authority, but who succumbed immediately when touched feelings. He got up at dawn and walked five miles to a barn in the middle of the pastures, where a teacher gathered the children of the area to give them a basic instruction. He helped his grandmother in the chores of the house and his grandfather in the workshop, went to the hill in search of pottery and washed his brushes, but was never interested in other aspects of his art. When Claveles was nine years old, Amparo Medina, who had been shrinking and reduced to the appearance of an infant, woke up cold in her bed, exhausted by so many maternities and so many years of work. Her husband exchanged his best cock for some tables and made an urn decorated with biblical scenes. Her granddaughter dressed her for the funeral with a habit of Santa Bernadette, white robe and blue cord at the waist, the same used by her for his First Communion, and that was just right to the old woman's emaciated body. Jesus Dionisio and Claveles left the house heading for the cemetery, pulling a wheelbarrow where the coffin was decorated with paper flowers. Along the way were joined by friends, men and women with their heads covered, who accompanied them in silence.

The old saints sculptor and his granddaughter were left alone in the house. In a sign of mourning they painted a large cross on the door and both wore for years a black ribbon sewn on the sleeve. Grandpa tried to replace his wife in the practical details of life, but nothing was as before. The absence of Amparo Medina invaded him inside, like a malignant disease, he felt his blood run down, his memories darkened, his cotton bones turned, his spirit filled with doubts. For the first time in his existence he rebelled against fate, wondering why she had been taken away without him. From then on he could no longer make Pesebres, from his hands only came Calvarios and Santos Martires, all dressed in mourning, to which Claveles pasted signs with pathetic messages to Divine Providence, dictated by his grandfather. These figures did not have the same acceptance among the tourists of the city, who preferred the scandalous colors attributed by mistake to the indigenous temperament, nor among the peasants, who needed to adore happy deities, because the only consolation to the sorrows of this world was to imagine that in heaven they were always partying. Jesus Dionisio Picero found it almost impossible to sell his handicrafts, but he continued to manufacture them, because in that job he spent the hours without fatigue, as if it were always early. However, neither the work nor the presence of her granddaughter could alleviate it and she began to

drink secretly, so that no one would notice her shame. Drunkard called his wife and sometimes he could see her by the kitchen stove. Without the diligent care of Amparo Medina, the house deteriorated, the chickens became ill, the goat had to be sold, the orchard was dried and soon they were the poorest family around. Shortly after, Claveles left to work in a neighboring town. At the age of fourteen his body had already reached the definitive shape and size, and since he did not have the coppery skin or the firm cheekbones of the other members of the family, Jesús Dionisio Picero concluded that his mother must have been white, which offered an explanation for the unusual fact that he had left her at the door of a barracks.

After a year and a half Claveles Picero returned to the house with spots on his face and a prominent belly. He found his grandfather with no company other than a leash of hungry dogs and a couple of pitiful roosters loose in the yard, talking alone, his eyes lost, with signs of not having washed in a while. The greatest disorder surrounded him. He had left his piece of land and spent the hours making saints with insane urgency, but from his old talent there was little left. His sculptures were deformed and dismal beings, inappropriate for devotion or for sale, which were piled up in the corners of the house like piles of wood. Jesus Dionisio Picero had changed so much that he did not try to give his granddaughter a speech about the sin of throwing children into the world without a known father, he did not seem to notice the signs of pregnancy. He just hugged her, trembling, calling her Amparo.

"Look at me well, Grandpa, I'm Claveles and I'm here to stay, because there's a lot to do here," said the girl, and left to light the kitchen to boil some potatoes and heat water to bathe the old man. During the following months, Jesus Dionisio seemed to rise from his duel, he stopped drinking, he returned to cultivate his garden, to take care of his roosters and to clean the church. He still spoke to the memory of his wife and occasionally confused the granddaughter with the grandmother, but regained the ability to laugh. The company of Carnations and the illusion that soon there would be another creature in the house returned the love to him by the colors and little by little it stopped embetuna his Saints with black paint, adorning them with more suitable clothes for the altar. The boy Claveles left his mother's womb one day at six in the afternoon and fell into the calloused hands of his great-grandfather, who had a long experience in these tasks, because he had helped to give birth to his thirteen children.

"His name will be Juan," the improvised midwife decided as soon as he cut the cord and wrapped his offspring in a diaper. -Why John? There is no Juan in the family, grandfather. - Because Juan was Jesus' best friend and this will be my friend. And what is the father's last name? - Remember that father does not have. - Then, Juan Picero. Two weeks after the birth of his great-grandson, Jesus Dionisio began cutting the sticks for a Nativity, the first he had made since the death of Amparo Medina. Claveles and his grandfather did not take long to realize that the child was abnormal. He had a curious look and moved like any baby, but he did not react when spoken to, he could stay awake and motionless for hours. They made the trip to the hospital and there they confirmed that he was deaf and therefore would be mute. The doctor added that there was not much hope for him, unless they were lucky and managed to place him in an institution in the city, where they would teach him good and in the future they could give him an office to earn a decent living and not be always a burden for others.

"Not to mention, Juan stays with us," said Jesus Dionisio Picero, without giving Carve a glance, crying with his head covered by his shawl. -What are we going to do, grandfather? she asked as she left. - Cry it, then. -How? -With patience, just as cocks are trained or put Calvaries in bottles. It is a matter of eye, time and heart. They did it. Regardless of the fact that the creature could not hear them, they spoke to him without respite, they sang to him, they placed him near the radio at full volume. The grandfather took the child's hand and firmly supported it on his own chest, so that he felt the vibration of his voice when

speaking, urged him to scream and celebrated his grunts with great fuss. As soon as he was able to sit down, he installed him beside him in a drawer, surrounded him with sticks, nuts, bones, pieces of cloth and pebbles to play with, and later, when he learned not to put it in his mouth, he passed a ball of mud to him. mold. Every time he got a job, Claveles left for the town, leaving his son in the hands of Jesus Dionisio. Wherever the old man the creature followed him like a shadow, they rarely separated. Between the two developed a solid camaraderie that eliminated the tremendous difference in age and the obstacle of the encio. Juan got used to observing the gestures and expressions of his great-grandfather's face to decipher his intentions, with such good results that by the year he learned to walk he was already able to read his thoughts. For his part, Jesus Dionisio looked after him like a mother. While his hands took care of delicate crafts, his instinct followed the child's steps, alert to any danger, but only intervened in extreme cases. He did not come near to comfort him after a fall or help him when he was in trouble, so he used to take care of himself. At an age when other boys are still tripping like puppies, Juan Picero could dress, wash and eat alone, feed the birds, fetch water from the well, know how to carve the simplest parts of the saints, mix colors and prepare the bottles for the Calvaries. - It will be necessary to send it to the school so that it does not remain gross like me - said Jesus Dionisio Picero when the seventh birthday of the boy approached. Claveles made some inquiries, but informed him that his son could not attend a normal course, because no teacher would be willing to venture into the abyss of solitude where he was immersed.

"No matter, grandfather, he will make a living making saints, like you," Claveles resigned. - That does not give to eat. - Not everyone can be educated, grandfather. -Juan is deaf, but not stupid. He has a lot of discernment and can get out of here, life in the country is very hard for him. Claveles was convinced that his grandfather had lost his mind or that love for the child prevented him from seeing his limitations. He bought a syllabary and tried to pass on his limited knowledge, but he could not make his son understand that those scribbles represented sounds and he ended up losing patience.

At that time the volunteers of Mrs. Dermoth appeared. They were young people from the city, who toured the most remote regions of the country talking about a humanitarian project to help the poor. Explaining that in some parts too many children were born and their parents could not feed them, while in others there were many couples without children. His organization was trying to alleviate this imbalance. They showed up at the Picero ranch with a map of North America and colored brochures showing pictures of dark children with blond parents, in luxurious environments with fireplaces, big shaggy dogs, pine trees decorated with silver glitter and balls. Christmas. After making a quick inventory of the Piceros' poverty, they were informed about the charitable mission of Mrs. Dermoth, who placed the most destitute children and gave them up for adoption to families with money, to save them from a life of misery. Unlike other institutions aimed at the same end, she dealt only with creatures with birth defects or ballasted by accidents or diseases. In the North there were some marriages-good Christians, of course-that were willing to adopt these children. They had all the resources to help them. There in the North there were clinics and schools where they worked miracles, the deaf and dumb, for example, they taught them to read the movement of the lips and to talk, then they went to special schools, they received full education and some enrolled in the university and ended up converted. in lawyers or doctors. The organization had helped many children, Picero could see the pictures, see how happy they look, how healthy, with all those toys, in those houses of the rich. The volunteers could not promise anything, but they would do everything possible to get one of those couples to welcome Juan, to give him all the opportunities that his mother could not offer him.

"You never have to get rid of the children, whatever happens," said Jesus Dionisio Picero, pressing the boy's head against his chest so he would not see the faces and guess the reason for the conversation. -Don't be selfish, man, think about what is best for him. Do not you see that there you will have everything? You do not have to buy medicine, you can not send it to school, what will become of it? This poor thing does not even have a father. "But he has a mother and great-grandfather," replied the old man. The visitors left, leaving Mrs. Dermoth's pamphlets on the table. In the days that followed Claveles was surprised many times by looking at them and comparing those spacious and well-decorated houses with their modest dwelling of planks, thatched roof and ground of rammed earth, those kind and well-dressed parents, with herself tired and barefoot, those children surrounded by toys and his kneading mud.

A week later Claveles met the volunteers in the market, where he had gone to sell some sculptures of his grandfather, and he heard again the same arguments, that an opportunity like that would not be presented to him again, that people adopt creatures healthy, never retarded, those people from the North were of noble feelings, who thought it well, because he would regret his whole life of denying his son so many advantages, condemning him to suffering and poverty. -Why do you want only sick children? Claveles asked. -Because they are half saints gringos. Our organization deals only with the most painful cases. For us it would be easier to place the normals, but it is about helping the destitute.

Claveles Picero again saw the volunteers several times. They always appeared when the grandfather was not in the house. Towards the end of November he was shown a portrait of a middle-aged couple standing at the door of a white house surrounded by a park, and was told that Mrs. Dermoth had found the ideal parents for her son. They pointed out on the map the precise place where they lived, they explained that there was snow in winter and the children made dolls, skated on the ice and skied, that in the autumn the forests looked like gold and that in the summer they could swim in the lake. The couple was so excited about the idea of adopting the child, that they had already bought him a bicycle. They also showed him the photograph of the bicycle. And all this without mentioning that they offered two hundred and fifty dollars to Claveles, with which she could marry and have healthy children. It would be crazy to reject that. Two days later, taking advantage of the fact that Jesús Dionisio had left to clean the church, Claveles Picero dressed his son with his best trousers, placed his christening medal around his neck and explained him in the language of gestures invented by his grandfather for him, they would not see each other for a long time, maybe never again, but it was all for their own good, he would go to a place where he would have food every day and gifts for his birthday. He took him to the address indicated by the volunteers, signed a paper giving Juan's custody to Mrs. Dermoth and ran away so that his son would not see his tears and burst into tears too.

When Jesus Dionisio Picero learned of what happened he lost his voice and his voice. He slammed down everything he could find, including the saints in bottles, and then lashed out at Claveles, striking her with unexpected violence on someone of his age and of such a meek nature. As soon as she could speak, she accused her of being equal to her mother, capable of getting rid of her own son, which even wild beasts do, and she cried out to the ghost of Amparo Medina pai, to take revenge on that depraved granddaughter. In the following months he did not address Claveles, only opened his mouth to eat and to mumble curses while his hands were busy with carving instruments. The Piceros got used to living in sullen silence, each one fulfilling their tasks. She cooked and put the plate on the table, he ate with his eyes fixed on the food ... Together they took care of the garden and the animals, each one repeating the gestures of his own routine, in perfect coordination with the other, without rubbing. On the days of the fair, she would take the wooden bottles and saints, start selling them, return with some

provisions and leave the remaining money in a jar. On Sundays the two went to church separated, as strangers.

Perhaps they would have spent the rest of their lives without speaking to each other if by mid-February Mrs. Dermoth's name had not made the news. The grandfather listened to the issue on the radio, when Claveles was washing clothes in the yard, first the speaker's comment and then the confirmation of the Social Welfare Secretary in person. Heart pounding, he leaned out the door, calling Claveles shouting. The girl turned around and when she saw him so distraught she thought he was dying and ran to hold him. -They killed him, oh Jesus, he sure was killed! the old man groaned, falling to his knees. - Who, grandfather! -A Juan ... -and half choked by the sobs he repeated the words of the Secretary of Social Welfare, that a criminal organization run by a Mrs. Dermoth sold indigenous children. They were chosen sick or from very poor families, with the promise that they would be placed for adoption. They kept them for a time in the process of fattening and when they were in better conditions they were taken to a clandestine clinic, where they operated. Dozens of innocents were sacrificed as organ banks, to remove their eyes, kidneys, liver and other parts of the body that were sent for transplants in the North. He added that in one of the fattening houses they had found twenty-eight creatures waiting for their turn, that the police had intervened and that the Government was continuing the investigations to dismantle that horrendous traffic.

Thus began the long journey of Claveles and Jesus Dionisio Picero to speak in the capital with the Secretary of Social Welfare. They wanted to ask him, with all due submission, if among the rescued children was his and if they could be returned. There was very little left of the money received, but they were willing to work as slaves for Mrs. Dermoth for as long as necessary, until paying her the last penny of those two hundred and fifty dollars.

THE SCHOOL TEACHER'S GUEST

Master Inés entered the Pearl of the East, which at that time was without clients, went to the counter where Riad Halabi rolled a multicolored flower fabric and announced that he had just cut the neck of a guest of his pension. The merchant pulled out his white handkerchief and covered his mouth.

- How do you say, Ines? -What you heard, Turkish. -Is dead? -Of course. -Now what are you gonna do? "I come to ask you that," she said, straightening a strand of hair.

"You'd better close the store," Riad Halabi sighed. They had known each other for so long, that none could remember the number of years, although both kept in memory every detail of that first day when they began their friendship.

He was then one of those traveling salesmen who go on the roads offering their merchandise, pilgrim of commerce, without a compass or fixed course, an Arab immigrant with a false Turkish passport, lonely, tired, with a palate split like a rabbit and a desire unbearable to sit in the shade; and she was still a young woman, with a firm back and strong shoulders, the only teacher in the village, the mother of a twelve-year-old boy, born of a fleeting love. The son was the center of the teacher's life, took care of it with an uncompromising dedication and could barely conceal his tendency to pamper him, applying the same rules of discipline to the other children in the school, so that no one could comment that he was spoiling him. and to nullify the father's fractious inheritance, forming it, instead, of clear thinking and kind heart. The same afternoon that Riad Halabi entered Agua Santa at one end, on the other a group of boys brought the body of the son of Maestra Ines on an improvised travois. He had gone into a land outside to pick up a mango and the owner, an outsider nobody knew from those sides, shot him with a rifle shot with the intention of frightening him, marking the middle of his forehead with a black circle where he was escaped life. At that time the merchant discovered his vocation as a boss and without knowing how, found himself at the center of the event, comforting the mother, organizing the funeral as if he were a member of the family and holding people to avoid tearing the responsible. Meanwhile, the murderer realized that it would be very difficult for him to save his life if he stayed there and escaped from the village ready to never return. "Riad Halabí had to lead the next morning to lead the crowd that left the cemetery towards the place where it had fallen. the boy. All the inhabitants of Agua Santa spent that day hauling mangoes, which they threw through the windows until filling the house completely, from floor to ceiling. In a few weeks the sun fermented the fruit, which burst in a thick juice, permeating the walls with a golden blood of a sweet pus, which transformed the house into a fossil of prehistoric dimensions, a huge beast in the process of rotting, tormented by the infinite diligence of larvae and mosquitoes of decomposition.

The death of the child, the role he played in those days and the reception he had in Agua Santa determined the existence of Riad Halabí. He forgot his nomadic ancestor and stayed in the village. There he installed his warehouse, La Perla de Oriente. He got married, widowed, remarried and kept selling, while his prestige as a just man grew. For her part, Inés educated several generations of creatures with the same tenacious affection that she would have given her son, until she was overcome by fatigue, so she gave way to other teachers who arrived from the city with new syllabaries and she left. When she left the classrooms, she felt that she was getting old suddenly and that time was accelerating, the days were passing too fast without her being able to remember what the hours had gone.

-I'm stunned, Turkish. I'm dying without realizing it, "he commented. You're as healthy as ever, Agnes. What happens is that you get bored, you should not be idle, "Riad Halabi replied and gave him the idea of adding some rooms in his house and turning it into a boarding house.

-In this town there is no hotel. "There are no tourists either," she argued. -A clean bed and a hot breakfast are blessings for passing travelers. So it was, mainly for the truckers of the Petroleum Company, who stayed overnight at the boarding house when the tiredness and tedium of the road filled their brains with hallucinations.

Master Agnes was the most respected midwife of Holy Water. He had educated all the children of the place for several decades, which gave him the authority to intervene in the lives of each one and throw their ears when he considered it necessary. The girls took her boyfriends to approve them, the husbands consulted her in their fights, she was a counselor, referee and judge in all problems, her authority was more solid than that of the priest, the doctor or the police. Nothing stopped her in the exercise of that power. On one occasion he went into the checkpoint, passed the lieutenant without saying hello, took the keys hanging from a nail in the wall and took one of his students out of the cell, imprisoned because of a drunkenness. The officer tried to stop him, but she gave him a push and took the boy by the neck. Once on the street she gave him a couple of slap and announced that the next time she would lower her pants to give him a memorable spanking. The day Agnes went to announce that she had killed a client, Riad Halabí had no doubt that he was serious, because he knew her too much. He took her by the arm and walked with her the two blocks that separated La Perla de Oriente from her house. It was one of the best buildings in the town, made of adobe and wood, with a wide porch where hammocks were hung in the warmest naps, bathrooms with running water and fans in all the rooms. At that hour it seemed to be empty, only a guest was resting in the living room drinking beer with his eyes lost on television.

-Where is? the Arab merchant whispered. -In one of the back pieces - she answered without lowering her voice.

He led him to the row of rental rooms, all linked by a long roofed corridor, with purple trinitas climbing the columns and fern pots hanging from the beams, around a patio where medlars and bananas grew. Ines opened the last door and Riad Halabi entered the room in shadows. The blinds were drawn and it took a few moments to adjust the eyes and see on the bed the body of an innocent-looking old man, a decrepit stranger, swimming in the puddle of his own death, his pants stained with excrement, his head hanging from a strip of livid skin and a terrible expression of dismay, as if he were apologizing for all the fuss and blood and for the tremendous mess of letting himself be killed. Riad Halabi sat on the only chair in the room, staring at the ground, trying to control the start of her stomach. Ines stood with her arms crossed over her chest, calculating that she would need two days to wash the stains and at least two more to vent the smell of shit and dread. -How did you do it? asked Riad Halabí at last, wiping away the sweat. -With the machete of chopping coconuts. I came from behind and gave it a single blow. No account was given, poor devil.

-Why? -I had to do it, that's life. Look what bad luck, this old man did not think to stop in Agua Santa, was crossing the town and a stone broke the glass of the car. He came to spend a few hours here while the Italian from the garage got him another spare one. It has changed a lot, we have all aged, according to

It seems, but I recognized it to the point. I waited for him for many years, sure that he would come, sooner or later. He is the man with the mangoes.

"Allah protect us," Riad Halabi murmured. -Do you think we should call the Lieutenant? - No pod, how you can think of it. -I'm on my right, he killed my boy. -I would not understand, Ines. -Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, Turkish. Does not your religion say that? -The law does not work that way, Ines. -Well, then we can accommodate him a little and say that he committed suicide.

- Do not touch it. How many guests are there in the house? - Only a truck driver. It will go barely cool, you have to drive to the capital.

-Well, do not receive anyone else. Lock the door of this piece and wait for me, I return in the night.

-What are you going to do? -I'll fix this my way. Riad Halabí was sixty-five years old, but still retained the same vigor of youth and the same spirit that placed him at the head of the crowd the day he arrived in Agua Santa. He left the house of Maestra Ines and went quickly to the first of several visits he had to make that afternoon. In the following hours a persistent whisper went through the town, whose inhabitants shook the drowsiness of years, excited by the most fantastic news, which they were repeating from house to house like an irrepressible rumor, a news that was trying to burst into screams and to which the same need to keep it in a murmur gave it a special value. Before sundown, that uneasy restlessness that in the following years would be a characteristic of the village, incomprehensible to the outsiders who could not see in this place nothing extraordinary, but only an insignificant hamlet, was felt in the air. like so many others, on the edge of the jungle. From early on, the men began to arrive at the tavern, the women went out onto the sidewalks with their kitchen chairs and settled down to take a breath, the young people flocked to the square as if it were a Sunday. The Lieutenant and his men took a couple of routine turns and then accepted the invitation of the brothel girls, who were celebrating a birthday, they said. At dusk there were more people on the street than one day of All Saints, each engaged in their own with such showy diligence that they seemed to be posing for a movie, some playing dominoes, others drinking rum and smoking in the corners, some couples strolling hand in hand, mothers running around with their children, grandmothers nosing through open doors. The priest lit the lanterns of the parish and blew up the bells calling to pray the novenario of San Isidoro Mártir, but nobody was in the mood for that kind of devotions.

At half past nine, the Arab, the town doctor and four young men she had educated from the first letters and who were already a few hombronazos returning from military service met at the house of Maestra Inés. Riad Halabí led them to the last room, where they found the corpse covered with insects, because the window had been left open and it was time for the mosquitoes. They put the unhappy man in a canvas sack, they took him out of the way to the street and they threw him without much ceremony in the back of Riad Halabi's vehicle. They crossed the whole town along the main street, greeting as it was the custom to the people who crossed them in front. Some greeted them with exaggerated enthusiasm, while others pretended not to see them, laughing with dissimulation, like children caught in some mischief. The van went to the place where many years before, Master Ines's son leaned for the last time to pick up a piece of fruit. In the glow of the moon they saw the property invaded by the malignant herb of abandonment, deteriorated by decrepitude and bad memories, a tangled hill where the mangoes grew wild, the fruits fell from the branches and rotted on the ground, giving birth to other bushes that in turn engendered others and thus to create a hermetic jungle that had swallowed the fences, the path and even the spoils of the house, of which there was only a trace almost imperceptible smell of jam. The men lit their kerosene lamps and set off into the forest, cutting their way through with machetes. When they considered that they had already advanced enough, one of them pointed to the ground and there, at the foot of a gigantic tree overwhelmed with fruit, they dug a deep hole, where they deposited the canvas

sack. Before covering it with earth, Riad Halabí said a short Muslim prayer, because he did not know others. They returned to the village at midnight and saw that nobody had left yet, the lights were still on in all the windows and people were walking through the streets. Meanwhile, Master Inés had washed the walls and furniture of the room with soap and water, burned the bedding, ventilated the house and waited for her friends with dinner and a jug of rum with pineapple juice. The meal passed with joy commenting on the latest rooster fights, barbarian sport, according to Maestra, but less barbarous than the bullfights, where a Colombian killer had just lost his liver, the men claimed. Riad Halabí was the last to say goodbye. That night, for the first time in his life, he felt old. At the door, Master Ines took his hands and held them for a moment between his.

-Thanks, Turkish, he said. - Why did you call me, Ines? -Because you are the person I love most in this world and because you should have been the father of my son. The next day the inhabitants of Agua Santa returned to their usual tasks enhanced by a magnificent complicity, by a secret of good neighbors, that they would keep with the greatest zeal, passing it to each other for many years as a legend of justice, until that the death of Master Inés freed us all and I can now tell about it.

THE PROPER RESPECT

They were a couple of scoundrels. He had the face of a corsair and had his hair and mustache dyed jet-black, but over time he changed his style and left his gray hair, which softened his expression and gave him a more circumspect air. She was sturdy, with that milky skin of red-haired Saxons, a skin that in the youth reflects the light with opalescent strokes, but in maturity it becomes stained paper. The years he spent in the oil camps and in the villages of the border did not end with his vigor, inheritance of his Scottish ancestors. Neither the mosquitoes, nor the heat nor the bad use could exhaust the body or reduce the desire to command. At the age of fourteen he abandoned his father, a Protestant pastor who preached the Bible in the middle of the jungle, an entirely useless task because no one understood his idiom in English and because in those latitudes the words, even those of God, are lost in the hubbub of the birds. At that age the girl had already reached her final stature and was in full control of her person. I was not a sentimental creature. He rejected one by one the men who, attracted by the incandescent flare of his hair, so rare in the tropics, offered him protection. He had not heard of love and it was not in his temperament to invent it, instead he knew how to make the best of the only good he possessed and by the time he was twenty-five he already had a handful of diamonds sewn into the fold of his petticoats. He gave them without hesitation to Domingo Toro, the only man who managed to tame her, an adventurer who traveled the region hunting alligators and trafficking in weapons and fake whiskey. He was an unscrupulous rascal, the perfect partner for Abigail McGovern.

In the early days the couple had to invent somewhat quirky businesses to increase their capital. With her diamonds and some savings that he had obtained with his contraband, his lizard skins and his traps in the game, Domingo bought chips from the Casino, because he knew that they were identical to those of another casino on the other side of the border, where the value of the currency was much higher. He filled a suitcase with chips and traveled to exchange them for hard cash. He managed to repeat the same operation twice before the authorities were alarmed and when they did it turned out that he could not be accused of anything legal. Meanwhile, Abigail traded some clay pots that she bought from the guajiros and sold as archeological pieces to the gringos of the Compañía de Petróleos, with such success that she was soon able to expand her business with false colonial paintings, made by a student in a succucho behind from the cathedral and hastily aged with sea water, soot and cat urine. By then she had dismissed the manners and curses of a rustler, had cut her hair and dressed in expensive suits. Although his taste was very elaborate and his efforts to appear elegant were too notorious, he could pass for a lady, which facilitated his social relations and contributed to the success of his business. He quoted his clients in the halls of the English Hotel and while he served the tea with the measured gestures that he had learned to copy, he spoke of hunting parties and tennis championships in hypothetical places of British name, which no one could place on a map. After the third cup, he mentioned in a confidential tone the purpose of that meeting, showed photographs of the alleged antiquities and made it clear that his intention was to save those treasures from local neglect. The government did not have the resources to preserve those extraordinary objects, he said, and to take them away from the country, even if it was legal, constituted an act of archeological awareness.

Once the Bulls laid the foundations of a small fortune, Abigail tried to found a line and convinced Domingo of the need to have a good name. What's wrong with ours? "No one calls himself Toro, it's a barman's surname," retorted Abigail.

-It is my father's and I will not change it. - In that case we have to convince everyone that we are rich.

He suggested buying land and planting bananas or coffee, like the Goths of yesteryear, but he did not like the idea of going to the provinces of the interior, wild land, exposed to gangs of thieves, the army or the guerrillas, vipers and all luck of pests; He believed that it was stupid to go to the jungle in search of a future, since it was within easy reach in the center of the capital, it was safer to engage in trade, like the thousands of Syrians and Jews who disembarked with a bundle. of miseries to the back and after a few years they lived with ease.

-No turqueries. What I want is a respectable family, that they call us a gift and doña and nobody dares to speak to us with our hats on, "she said. But he insisted and she finally complied with his decision, as she almost always did, because when she was put in front of her husband she mortified her with long periods of abstinence and silence. On those occasions he would disappear from the house for several days, come back battered with clandestine loves, move out of clothes and go out again, leaving Abigail furious at first and then terrified by the idea of losing him. She was a practical person, completely lacking in romantic feelings and if there was ever any seed of tenderness in her, the suripanta years destroyed her, but Domingo was the only man she could tolerate by his side and was not willing to let it go As soon as Abigail gave in, he went back to sleep in his bed. There were no noisy reconciliations, they simply resumed the rhythm of the routines and returned to the complicity of their traps. Domingo Toro installed a chain of stores in the poor neighborhoods, where he sold very cheaply, but in large quantities. The stores served as a screen for other less legal businesses. The money kept piling up and they were able to pay extravagances for the rich, but Abigail was not satisfied, because she realized that it was one thing to live with luxury and quite another to be accepted in society.

-If you had listened to me, they would not confuse us with Arab merchants. Look what to sell rags! she complained to her husband. -I do not know what you complain about, we have everything. -Go on to your poor bazaars, if that's what you want, but I'm going to buy racehorses. -Horses? What do you know about horses, woman? - That they are elegant, all the important people have horses. -We're going to ruin! For once Abigail managed to impose her will and soon found that it had not been a bad idea. The animals gave them pretexts to alternate with the old families of breeders and they were also profitable, but although the Bull appeared frequently in the equestrian pages of the press, they were never in the social chronicle. Enlightened, Abigail became more and more ostentatious. He ordered porcelain tableware with his hand-painted portrait in each piece, carved crystal glasses and furniture with furious gargoyles on his legs, as well as a threadbare armchair that he passed as a colonial relic, telling everyone that he had belonged to the Liberator , which is why he tied a red cord in front so that no one could pose the seat where the Father of the Nation had done it. He got a German governess for his children and a Dutch vagabond, whom he dressed as admiral, to run the family yacht. The only vestiges of the past were Domingo's filibuster tattoos and a back injury to

Abigail, as a result of wriggling open legs in their times of barbarism; but he covered his tattoos with long sleeves and she had an iron corset made with silk cushions to prevent pain from prostrating her dignity. By then she was an obese woman, covered in jewelry, similar to Nero. The ambition marked in her the physical ravages that the adventures in the jungle had not managed to do to her.

With the intention of attracting the most select of the society, the Bulls offered each year for carnival a costume party: the Baghdad court with the elephant and the camels of the zoo and an army of young men dressed as Bedouins; the Baile de Versailles, where guests in brocaded suits and powdered wigs danced minuet between beveled mirrors; and other scandalous parties that were part of local legends and gave rise to violent diatribes in the newspapers of the left. They had to bet guards at home to prevent students, outraged by waste, painted slogans on the columns and poop through the windows, claiming that the new rich filled their bathtubs with champagne, while the new poor hunted the cats of the roofs to eat them. These francachelas gave them some respectability, because by then the line that divided the social classes was fading, the country came people from all corners of the earth attracted by the miasma of oil, the capital grew without control, fortunes were made and they were lost in a flash and there was no possibility of finding out the origins of each one. However, highland families kept the Toro at a distance, even though they themselves descended from other immigrants whose only merit was having reached these shores half a century in advance. They attended the banquets of Domingo and Abigail and sometimes they walked through the Caribbean on the yacht guided by the firm hand of the Dutch captain, but they did not pay for the attentions received. Maybe Abigail would have had to resign herself to a second plane, if an unexpected event does not turn their luck.

That August afternoon Abigail woke up embarrassed from the siesta, it was very hot and the air was loaded with storm omens. She put on a silk dress over the corset and was led to the beauty parlor. The car went through the crowded streets with the glass closed, to avoid that some resentful - of those who were more and more - spit the lady out the window, and stopped at the premises at five o'clock, where he entered after to tell the driver to pick her up one hour later. When the man returned to look for her, Abigail was not there. The hairdressers said that within five minutes of arriving, the lady announced that she was going to do a short errand, but she did not come back. Meanwhile, Domingo Toro received the first call of the Red Cougars in his office, an extremist group that no one had ever heard of before, to announce that they had kidnapped his wife. Thus began the scandal that saved the prestige of the Bulls. The police stopped the driver and the hairdressers, raided entire neighborhoods and cordoned off the Toro mansion, with the consequent inconvenience of the neighbors. A television bus blocked the street for days and a troop of journalists, detectives and onlookers trampled the meadows of the houses. Domingo Toro appeared on the screens, sitting in the leather chair of his library, between a map of the world and an embalmed mare, imploring the plagiarists to return him to the mother of his children. The bargain magnate, as the press called him, offered a million for his wife, a very exaggerated figure, because another guerrilla group had only obtained half of it by a Middle East ambassador. However, the Red Pumas did not seem enough and asked for double.

After seeing Abigail's photograph in the newspapers, many thought that Domingo's best business would be to pay that figure, not to recover his spouse, but so that the kidnappers will stay with her. An incredulous exclamation crossed the country when the husband, after some consultations with bankers and lawyers, accepted the deal, despite the warnings from the police. Hours before delivering the stipulated sum, he received by mail a lock of red hair and a note indicating that the price had increased by another quarter of a million. By then also the children of the Toro went on television sending messages of filial desperation to Abigail. The macabre auction was rising day by day, before the attentive eyes of the press. The suspense ended five days later, just when the curiosity of the public began to deviate in other directions. Abigail appeared tied and gagged in a car parked in the middle, somewhat nervous and disheveled, but no visible damage and even a little fatter. The afternoon Abigail returned home a small crowd gathered in the street to applaud that husband who had given such proof of love.

Faced with the harassment of journalists and the demands of the police, Domingo Toro assumed an attitude of discrete gallantry, refusing to reveal how much he had paid on the grounds that his wife had no price. The popular exaggeration attributed to her an entirely improbable character, much more than any man had ever paid for a woman and less for his. That turned the Bulls into a symbol of opulence, it was said that they were as rich as the President, who had benefited for years from the oil revenues of the Nation and whose fortune was calculated as one of the five largest in the world. Domingo and Abigail were encumbered with the high society, where they had not had access until then. Nothing obscured his triumph, not even the public protests of the students, who hung canvases at the University accusing Abigail of kidnapping herself, the tycoon to take the millions out of one pocket to put them in another without paying taxes, and the police swallow the story of the Red Pumas to scare people and justify the purges against the opposition parties. But the gossips did not manage to destroy the magnificent effect of the kidnapping and a decade later the ToroMcGovem had become one of the most respectable families in the country.

INTERMINABLE LIFE

There are all kinds of stories. Some are born to be counted, their substance is language and before someone puts them into words are just an emotion, a whim of the mind, an image or an intangible reminiscence. Others come complete, like apples, and can be repeated to infinity without risk of altering their meaning. There are some taken from reality and processed by inspiration, while others are born from a moment of inspiration and become reality when they are told. And there are secret stories that remain hidden in the shadows of memory, they are like living organisms, they grow roots, tentacles, fill with adhesions and parasites and eventually become the stuff of nightmares. Sometimes to exorcise the demons of a memory it is necessary to tell it like a story.

Ana and Roberto Blaum grew old together, so united that over the years they came to look like brothers; both had the same expression of benevolent surprise, equal wrinkles, gestures of the hands, inclination of the shoulders; both were marked by similar customs and desires. They had shared every day for most of their lives and as much walking hand in hand and sleeping embraced could agree to be in the same dream. They had never separated since they met, half a century ago. At that time, Roberto studied medicine and already had the passion that determined his existence to wash the world and redeem his neighbor, and Ana was one of those young virgins capable of beautifying everything with her candor. They were discovered through music. She was a violinist in a chamber orchestra and he, who came from a family of virtuosos and liked to play the piano, did not miss a concert. He distinguished on the stage that girl dressed in black velvet and lace collar who played her instrument with her eyes closed and fell in love with her from a distance. Months passed before he dared to speak to him and when he did, four sentences were enough for both of them to understand that they were destined for a perfect bond. The war surprised them before they were able to get married and, as thousands of Jews hallucinated by the horror of the persecutions, they had to escape from Europe. They embarked in a port in Holland, with no more luggage than their clothes, some books by Roberto and Ana's violin. The ship went two years adrift, unable to dock at any dock, because the nations of the hemisphere did not want to accept your refugee cargo. After touring several seas, he arrived on the Caribbean coast. By then he had the helmet like a cauliflower of shells and lichens, moisture oozed out of his interior in a linquing persistent, his machines had turned green and all the crew and passengers - less Ana and Roberto defended by hopelessness by the illusion of love - they had aged two hundred years. The captain, resigned to the idea of continuing to wander forever, made a stop with his transatlantic shell in a corner of the bay, in front of a beach of phosphorescent sands and slender palm trees crowned with feathers, so that the sailors could descend at night to load fresh water for deposits. But until there no more arrived. At dawn the next day it was impossible to start the machines, corroded by the effort of moving with a mixture of salt water and gunpowder, for lack of better fuels. At midmorning the authorities of the nearest port appeared in a boat, a handful of cheerful mulattos with unbuttoned uniforms and the best will, who according to the regulations ordered them to leave their territorial waters, but knowing the sad fate of the The sailors and the deplorable state of the ship suggested to the captain that they should stay there for a few days, sunbathing, to see if, by giving them rein, the inconveniences were solved by themselves,

as it almost always happens. During the night all the inhabitants of that unfortunate ship descended in the boats, stepped on the warm sands of that country whose name they could barely pronounce, and they lost themselves inland in the voluptuous vegetation, ready to cut their beards, get rid of their moldy rags and to shake off the ocean winds that had hardened their souls.

This is how Ana and Roberto Blaum began their immigrant destinies, first working as workers to survive and later, when they learned the rules of that fickle society, they took root and he was able to finish medical studies interrupted by the war. They ate banana and coffee and lived in a humble boarding house, in a room of scarce dimensions, whose window framed a street lamp. At night Roberto took advantage of that light to study and Ana to sew. At the end of the work he would sit and look at the stars on the neighboring roofs and she would play on his violin old melodies, a custom that they kept as a way to close the day. Years later, when the name of Blaum was famous, those times of poverty were mentioned as a romantic reference in the prologues of books or in newspaper interviews. Luck changed them, but they maintained their attitude of extreme modesty, because they did not manage to erase the traces of the past sufferings nor could they free themselves from the feeling of precariousness proper to exile. They were both of the same height, with clear pupils and strong bones. Roberto looked wise, a messy mane crowned his ears, he wore thick lenses with round tortoiseshell frames, he always wore a gray suit, which he replaced with another when Ana gave up trying to keep darning his fists, and leaned on a cane. bamboo that a friend brought him from India. He was a man of few words, precise in speaking as in everything else, but with a delicate sense of humor that softened the weight of his knowledge. His students would have to remember him as the kindest teacher. Ana had a happy and confident temperament, she was incapable of imagining the badness of others and that's why she was immune to it. Roberto recognized that his wife was endowed with an admirable practical sense and from the beginning he delegated important decisions and the administration of money. Ana took care of her husband with mother mimes, cut her hair and nails, watched her health, her food and her sleep, was always within reach of her call. So indispensable was the company of each other, that Ana renounced her musical vocation, because she would have forced her to travel frequently, and only played the violin in the privacy of the house. He took the habit of going with Roberto at night to the morgue or to the library of the university where he stayed for long hours. They both liked the solitude and silence of closed buildings. Then they would return walking through the empty streets to the poor neighborhood where their house was located. With the uncontrolled growth of the city that sector became a nest of traffickers, prostitutes and thieves, where even the police cars did not dare to move after sunset, but they crossed it at dawn without being disturbed. . Everyone knew them. There was no disease or problem that was not consulted with Roberto and no children had grown up there without trying Ana's cookies. The strangers were someone who explained to them from the beginning that for reasons of feeling the old ones were untouchable. They added that the Blaums were a pride for the Nation, that the President himself had decorated Roberto and that they were so respectable, that even the Guard did not bother them when they entered the neighborhood with their war machines, raiding the houses one by one.

I met them at the end of the sixties, when in their madness my godmother opened her neck with a knife. We took her to the hospital bleeding in a gush,

without anyone encouraging real hope to save her, but we had the good fortune that Roberto Blaum was there and calmly proceeded to sew his head in his place. To the amazement of the other doctors, my Godmother recovered. I spent many hours sitting by her bed during the weeks of convalescence and there were several occasions to talk with Roberto. Little by little we started a solid friendship. The Blaums had no children and I think they needed them, because eventually they came to treat me as if I were. I went to see them often, rarely at night so as not to venture alone in that neighborhood, they entertained me with a special dish for lunch. I liked helping Roberto in the garden and Ana in the kitchen. Sometimes she would take her violin and give me a couple of hours of music. They gave me the key to their house and when they were traveling I took care of the dog and watered the

plants. The successes of Roberto Blaum had begun early, despite the delay that the war imposed on his career. At an age when other doctors started in the operating rooms, he had already published some worthwhile essays, but his notoriety began with the publication of his book on the right to a peaceful death. He was not tempted by private medicine, except when it was a friend or neighbor, and preferred to practice his trade in the indigent hospitals, where he could care for a greater number of patients and learn something new every day. Long shifts in the pavilions of the dying inspired him a compassion for those fragile bodies chained to the machines of living, with the ordeal of needles and hoses, to whom science denied them a dignified end on the pretext that they should keep their breath at any cost. It hurt him not to be able to help them leave this world and be obliged, instead, to hold them against their will in their dying beds. Sometimes the torment imposed on one of his patients became so unbearable that he could not take it away from his mind for a moment. Ana must wake him up, because he was screaming asleep. In the shelter of the sheets he embraced his wife, his face buried in her breasts, desperate. Why do not you disconnect the tubes and relieve the suffering of that poor wretch? It is the most pious thing you can do. He's going to die anyway, sooner or later ...

-I can not, Ana. The law is very clear, nobody has a right to the life of another, but for me this is a matter of conscience. -We've been through this before, and every time you suffer the same regrets. No one will know, it will be a matter of a couple of minutes. If Roberto ever did it, only Ana knew it. His book proposed that death, with its ancestral burden of terrors, is only the abandonment of an unusable shell, while the spirit is reintegrated into the unique energy of the cosmos. Agony, like birth, is a stage of the journey and deserves the same mercy. There is no virtue in prolonging the beats and tremors of a body beyond the natural end, and the doctor's job should be to facilitate death, instead of contributing to the cumbersome bureaucracy of death. But such a decision could not depend only on the discernment of the professionals or the mercy of the relatives, it was necessary that the law indicated a criterion.

The Blaum proposal provoked an uproar of priests, lawyers and doctors. Soon the issue transcended scientific circles and invaded the street, dividing opinions. For the first time someone talked about that issue, until then death was a silent issue, betting on immortality, each with the secret hope of living forever. While the discussion remained at a philosophical level, Roberto Blaum appeared in all forums to support his argument, but when it became another fun of the masses, he took refuge in his work, scandalized by the shamelessness with which they exploited his theory. For commercial purposes.

Death

It came to the fore, stripped of all reality and turned into a happy fashion motif.

One part of the press accused Blaum of promoting euthanasia and compared his ideas with those of the Nazis, while another part hailed him as a saint. He ignored the commotion and continued his investigations and his work in the hospital. His book was translated into several languages and spread to other countries, where the subject also provoked passionate reactions. His photography often came out in science magazines. That year he was offered a chair at the Faculty of Medicine and soon became the most requested teacher by the students. There was no hint of arrogance in Roberto Blaum, nor the exultant fanaticism of the administrators of the divine revelations, only the gentle certainty of the studious men. The greater the fame of Roberto, the more secluded was the life of the Blaum. The impact of that brief celebrity, scared and ended up admitting very few in his inner circle.

Roberto's theory was forgotten by the public as quickly as it became fashionable. The law was not changed, not even the problem was discussed in Congress, but in the academic and scientific field the prestige of the doctor increased. In the following thirty years Blaum formed several generations of surgeons, discovered new drugs and surgical techniques and organized a system of ambulatory offices,

wagons, ships and small planes equipped with everything necessary to attend from births to various epidemics, which traveled the national territory carrying relief to the most remote areas, where once only the missionaries had placed their feet. He received countless awards, he was Rector of the University for a decade and Minister of Health for two weeks, which took time to gather evidence of administrative corruption and waste of resources and present them to the President, who had no alternative but to dismiss him, because it was not about shaking the foundations of the government to please an idealist. In those decades, Blaum continued the research with the dying. He published several articles about the obligation to tell the truth to the seriously ill, so that they would have time to accommodate the soul and not be stunned by the surprise of dying, and about the respect due to suicides and the ways to end to one's life without pain or useless stridency.

The name of Blaum was again pronounced in the streets when his last book was published, which not only shook traditional science, but provoked an avalanche of illusions throughout the country. In his long experience in hospitals Roberto had treated countless cancer patients and observed that while some were defeated by death, with the same treatment others survived. In his book, Roberto tried to demonstrate the relationship between cancer and mood, and assured that sadness and loneliness facilitate the multiplication of fateful cells, because when the patient is depressed they lower the body's defenses, instead if they have good reasons to live your body fight without truce against evil. He explained that the cure, therefore, can not be limited to surgery, chemistry or apothecary resources, which attack only the physical manifestations, but must contemplate above all the condition of the spirit. The last chapter suggested that the best disposition is found in those who have a good partner or some other form of affection, because love has a beneficial effect that even the most powerful drugs can not overcome.

The press immediately grasped the fantastic possibilities of this theory and put into Blaum's mouth things he had never said. If before the death caused an unusual uproar, on this occasion something equally natural was treated as a novelty. They attributed to the love virtues of Philosopher's Stone and said that it could cure all evils. Everyone talked about the book, but very few read it. The simple assumption that the affliction can be good for the health was complicated to the extent that everyone wanted to add or take something away, until the original idea of Blauni was lost in a tangle of absurdities, creating a colossal confusion in the public. There was no lack of rogues who tried to take advantage of the matter, seizing love as if it were an invention of their own. New esoteric sects, schools of psychology, courses for beginners, clubs for loners, pills of infallible attraction, devastating perfumes and endless fortune-tellers who used their decks and their glass balls to sell sentiments of four cents proliferated. They barely discovered that Ana and Roberto Blaum were a couple of moving elders, who had been together for a long time and who retained intact the strength of the body, the faculties of the mind and the quality of their love, made them living examples. In addition to the scientists who analyzed the book until exhaustion, the only ones who read it without sensational purposes were cancer patients, however, for them the hope of a definitive cure turned into an atrocious mockery, because in truth nobody could tell them where to find love, how to obtain it, much less how to preserve it. Although perhaps the idea of Blaum was not lacking in logic, in practice it was inapplicable.

Roberto was dismayed at the size of the scandal, but Ana reminded him of what had happened before and convinced him that it was a matter of sitting down to wait a bit, because the noise would not last long. This is what happened. The Blaum were not in the city when the clamor deflated. Roberto had retired from work in the hospital and in the university, claiming that he was tired and that he was old enough to live a more peaceful life. But he could not remain aloof from his own celebrity, his home was invaded by supplicants, journalists, students, teachers, and curious people who arrived at all times. He

told me that he needed silence, because he planned to write another book, and I helped him find a secluded place to take refuge. We found a house in La Colonia, a strange village embedded in a tropical hill, replica of a Bavarian village of the nineteenth century, an architectural rave of painted wooden houses, cuckoo clocks, pots of geraniums and notices with Gothic letters, inhabited by a race of blond people with the same zip-lines and ruddy cheeks that their great-grandparents brought when they emigrated from the Black Forest. Even though La Colonia was the tourist attraction that it is today, Roberto was able to rent an isolated property where weekend traffic did not arrive. They asked me to take charge of their affairs in the capital, I collected the money from their retirement, the accounts and the mail. At first I visited them frequently, but soon I realized that in my presence they maintained a somewhat forced cordiality, very different from the warm welcome that I had previously lavished upon myself. I did not think that it was something against me, much less, I always counted on his confidence and esteem, I simply deduced that they wanted to be alone and I preferred to communicate with them by phone and by letter. When Roberto Blaum called me for the last time, I had not seen them for a year. He talked very little with him, but he had long conversations with Ana. I gave him news of the world and she told me about her past, which seemed to be getting more and more vivid for her, as if all the memories of yesteryear were part of her present. In the silence that now surrounded her. Sometimes he would send me by various means oatmeal cookies that he baked for me and bags of lavender to perfume the cabinets. In the last months she also sent me delicate gifts: a handkerchief that her husband gave her many years ago, photographs of her youth, an old pin. I guess that, plus the desire to stay away and the fact that Roberto avoided talking of the book in preparation, they should have given me the keys, but I really did not imagine what was happening in that house in the mountains. Later, when I read Ana's diary, I learned that Roberto did not write a single line. During all that time he devoted himself entirely to loving his wife, but that did not succeed in diverting the course of events.

On weekends the trip to La Colonia becomes a pilgrimage of cars with hot engines that move around the wheels, but during the other days, especially in the rainy season, it is a lonely walk along a route of sharp curves that cuts the tops of the hills, between surprising abysses and forests of canes and palms. That afternoon there were clouds trapped between the hills and the landscape looked like cotton. The rain had silenced the birds and there was no sound but the sound of water against the windows. As I ascended, it cooled the air and I felt the storm suspended in the fog, like a climate from another latitude. Suddenly, in a bend of the road appeared that hamlet of Germanic aspect, with its roofs inclined to support a snow that would never fall. To get to where the Blaum had to cross the whole town, which at that time seemed deserted. His cabin was similar to all the others, dark wood with carved eaves and windows with lace curtains, in front a well-kept garden flourished and a small strawberry orchard lay behind. There was a cold blizzard whistling through the trees, but I saw no smoke in the chimney. The dog, who had accompanied them for years, was lying on the porch and did not move when I called him, raised his head and looked at me without moving his tail, as if he did not recognize me, but he followed me when I opened the door, which was without a key, and crossed the threshold. It was dark. I stuck the wall looking for the switch and turned on the lights. Everything was in order, there were fresh branches of eucalyptus in the vases, which filled the air with a clean smell. I went through the living room of that rental house, where nothing showed the presence of the Blaum, except the piles of books and the violin, and I was surprised that in a year and a half my friends had not implanted their personalities to the place where they lived.

I went up the stairs to the attic, where the master bedroom was, a large room, with high ceilings of rustic beams, faded paper on the walls and ordinary furniture of vague Provencal style. A bedside lamp illuminated the bed, on which Ana lay, in the blue silk dress and the coral necklace that I had seen her use so many times. In death she had the same expression of innocence with which she appears in the photograph of her wedding, taken long ago, when the captain of the ship married her to Roberto seventy miles from the coast, that splendid afternoon when the flying fish came out of the water. sea to announce to the refugees that the promised land was near. The dog that had followed me, shrugged in a corner moaning softly.

On the night table, next to an unfinished embroidery and to Anna's diary, I found a note from Roberto addressed to me, in which he asked me to take charge of his dog and to bury them in the same coffin in the Cemetery of that village of stories. They had decided to die together, because she was in the last phase of a cancer and they preferred to travel to another stage hand in hand, as they had always been, so that in the fleeting moment when the spirit comes off they would not risk getting lost in some vericuerdo of the vast universe. I went through the house in search of Roberto. I found him in a small room behind the kitchen, where he had his study, sitting at a desk in light wood, his head in his hands, sobbing. On the table was the syringe with which he injected the poison to his wife, loaded with the dose meant for him. I stroked the back of his neck, he raised his eyes and he looked at me for a long time. I suppose he wanted to spare Ana the suffering of the end and prepared the departure of both so that nothing would alter the serenity of that.

Instantly, he cleaned the house, cut branches for the vases, dressed and combed his wife, and when everything was ready, he placed the injection. Consoling her with the promise that a few minutes later he would join her, he lay down beside her and held her until he was certain that he was no longer alive. He filled the syringe again, pulled up the sleeve of his shirt, and felt the vein, but things did not work out as planned. Then he called me. -I can not do it, Eva. Only I can ask you ... Please, help me to die.

A DISCRET MIRACLE

The Boulton family came from a merchant in Liverpool, who emigrated in the mid-nineteenth century with his tremendous ambition as his only fortune, and became rich with a flotilla of cargo ships in the southernmost and farthest country in the world. The Boultons were prominent members of the British colony, and as many Englishmen outside their island preserved their traditions and their language with an absurd tenacity, until the mixture with Creole blood knocked down the arrogance and changed the Anglo-Saxon names for more traditional ones .

Gilberto, Filomena and Miguel were born at the height of the Boulton fortune, but throughout their lives they saw maritime traffic decline and a substantial part of their income disappear. Although they stopped being rich, they were able to maintain their lifestyle. It was difficult to find three people of different looks and character than these three brothers. In old age the features of each one were accentuated, but in spite of their apparent disparities their souls coincided in the fundamental. Gilberto was a poet of seventy-odd years, with delicate features and a dancer's demeanor, whose existence had passed away from material needs, between art books and antiquities. He was the only one of his brothers who was educated in England, an experience that marked him deeply. The vice of tea remained forever. He never married, partly because he did not find the young pale woman who in his youthful verses so often appeared, and when he renounced that illusion it was too late, because his bachelor habits were deeply rooted. He mocked his blue eyes, his yellow hair and his ancestor, saying that almost all the Boultons were vulgar merchants, who by so much pretending to be aristocrats had ended up convinced that they were. However, he wore tweed jackets with leather patches on his elbows, played bridge, read the Times three weeks late, and cultivated the irony and phlegm attributed to British intellectuals. Filomena, resounding and simple as a peasant, was a vivid and grandmother of several grandchildren. She was endowed with a great tolerance, which allowed her to accept both the Anglophile whims of Gilberto and the fact that Miguel had holes in his shoes and the collar of his shirt in shreds. He never lacked the courage to listen to Gilberto's aches or to hear him recite his strange verses, or to collaborate in Miguel's innumerable projects. He inexhaustibly weaved jackets for his younger brother, whom he put on a couple of times and then gave to someone in need. The chopsticks were an extension of his hands, they moved with a mischievous rhythm, a continuous ticking that announced his presence and accompanied her always, like the aroma of his jasmine colony.

Miguel Boulton was a priest. Unlike his brothers, he was dark, short, almost entirely covered by black hair that would have given him a beastly appearance if his face had not been so kind. He abandoned the advantages of the family residence at seventeen and only returned to participate in Sunday lunches with his relatives, or for Filomena to take care of him on the rare occasions when he became seriously ill. He felt no nostalgia for the comforts of his youth and despite his outbursts of bad humor, he considered himself a lucky man and was happy with his existence. He lived next to the Municipal Dump, in a miserable town outside the city walls, where the streets had no pavement, acerancho was built with boards and flush, no trees. Your zinc plates. Sometimes, in the summer, stink fumes from the gases arose from the soil that leaked underground from the garbage dumps. Its furniture consisted of a bunk, a table, two chairs and shelves for books, and the walls sported revolutionary posters, brass crosses made by political prisoners, modest tapestries embroidered by the mothers of the disappeared, and pennants of their soccer team. favorite. Next to the crucifix, where every morning he communed alone and every night thanked God for the luck of being still alive, a red flag hung. Father Miguel was one of those beings marked by

the terrible passion of justice. In his long life he had accumulated so much suffering from others, that he was unable to think of his own pain, which, added to the certainty of acting in the name of God, made him reckless. Every time the military raided his house and accused him of being a subversive, they had to accord it to him, because they could not avoid being overwhelmed by insults interspersed with quotations from the Gospels. He had been arrested so often, done so many hunger strikes in solidarity with the prisoners, and sheltered so many persecuted, that according to the law of probabilities he should have died several times. His photograph, sitting before a local political police with a sign announcing that there tortured people, was spread throughout the world. There was no punishment capable of intimidating him, but they did not dare to make him disappear, like so many others, because he was already too well known. In the evenings, when he settled down before his little domestic altar to converse with God, he doubted whether his only impulses would be love of neighbor and the desire for justice, or if in his actions there would not also be a satanic arrogance. That man, capable of numbing a child with boleros and of spending sleepless nights looking after the sick, did not trust in the kindness of his own heart. He had fought his whole life against anger, which thickened his blood and made him burst into irrepressible outbursts. He secretly wondered what would become of him if the circumstances did not offer him such good pretexts to vent. Filomena was alive to him, but Gilberto felt that if nothing too serious had happened to him in almost seventy years of balancing on the tightrope, there was no reason to worry, since his brother's guardian angel had proved very efficient.

-The angels do not exist. They are semantic errors," Miguel replied. -Don't be a heretic, man. They were simple messengers until St. Thomas Aquinas invented all that hoax. "Are you going to tell me that the feather of the Archangel San Gabriel, venerated in Rome, comes from the tail of a vulture?" Gilberto laughed. -If you do not believe in angels, you do not believe in anything. Why are you still healing? You should change your trade, Filomena said. "They've already spent several centuries discussing how many of these creatures fit on the end of a pin. What difference does it make? Do not waste energy on angels, but on helping people! Miguel had lost his sight gradually and was almost blind. Of the right eye he saw nothing and of the left one little enough, he could not read and it was very difficult to leave his neighborhood, because he was lost in the streets. Each time more depended on Filomena to mobilize. She accompanied him or sent him the car with the driver, Sebastián Canuto, aka El Cuchillo, an ex-convict whom Miguel had taken out of prison and regenerated, and who had been working with the family for two decades. With the political turbulence of recent years, El Cuchillo became the priest's discreet bodyguard. When the rumor of a protest march ran, Filomena gave him the day off and he left for the town of Miguel, armed with a blackjack and a pair of mittens hidden in his pockets. He would stand on the street waiting for the priest to come out and then follow him from a distance, ready to defend him with blows or to drag him to safety if the situation demanded it. The nebula in which Miguel lived it prevented him from realizing much about these rescue maneuvers, which would have infuriated him, because he would consider it unfair to have such protection while the rest of the protesters could stand the blows, the jets of water and the gases. As Miguel's seventieth birthday approached his left eye suffered a stroke and in a few minutes he was left in complete darkness. He was in the church in an evening meeting with the villagers, talking about the need to organize to face the Municipal Dump, because you could no longer live among so much fly and smell so much rot. Many neighbors were on the opposite side of the Catholic religion, indeed for them there was no proof of the existence of God, on the contrary, the sufferings of their lives were an irrefutable demonstration that the universe was a pure racket, but also they they considered the local parish as the natural center of the population. The cross that Miguel wore hanging to his chest seemed only a minor inconvenience, a kind

of extravagance of old man. The priest was walking while talking, as was his custom, when he felt his temples and heart shoot at a gallop and his whole body was moistened in a sticky sweat. He attributed it to the heat of the argument, ran his sleeve across his forehead and for a moment closed his eyelids. When he opened them he thought he was sunk in a whirlpool at the bottom of the sea, he only perceived deep swells, spots, black on black. He stretched out an arm for support. "He cut the light," he said, thinking of another sabotage. His friends surrounded him scared. Father Boulton was a formidable companion, who had lived among them since they could remember. Until then they thought he was invincible, a strong and muscular man with a sergeant's voice and a mason's hands that joined in prayer, but that really seemed made for the fight. Suddenly they realized how tired he was, they saw him cramped and small, a child full of wrinkles. A chorus of women improvised the first remedies, forced him to lie down on the floor, put wet cloths on his head, gave him hot wine, massaged his feet; but nothing worked, on the contrary, with so much handling the patient was losing his breath. Miguel finally managed to get rid of people and get up, ready to face this new misfortune face to face.

"I'm scrubbed," he said without losing his calm. Please, call my sister and tell her I'm in a hurry, but do not give her details so she does not worry. At the hour Sebastián Canuto appeared, sullen and silent as always, announcing that Senora Filomena could not miss the episode of the telenovela and that here she sent him some silver and a basket with provisions for his people.

-This time it's not about that, Knife, I seem to have gone blind. The man got him into the car and without asking questions he took him through the entire city to the Boulton mansion, which stood full of elegance in the middle of a park somewhat abandoned, but still stately. He summoned all the inhabitants of the house to honks, helped to get the sick man down and transported him almost on a litter, moved to see him so light and so docile. His rudely stubborn face was wet with tears when he broke the news to Gilberto and Filomena.

-For the pelandusca who bore me, Don Miguelito has run out of eyes. This is the only thing we were missing, "cried the driver, unable to contain himself. "Do not swear before the poet," said the priest. "Put him in bed, Knife," Filomena ordered. This is not serious, it must be some cold. That happens to you for walking without a vest! -The time has stopped: night and day is always winter and there is a pure silence of antennas because of the blackness ... * began to improvise Gilberto. -Dell the cook to prepare a chicken broth-her sister silenced him.

The family doctor determined that it was not a cold and recommended that Miguel see an ophthalmologist. The next day, after a passionate exhibition about health, the gift of God and the right of the people, which the infamous ruling system had converted into the privilege of a caste, the patient agreed to go to a specialist. Sebastian Canuto led the three brothers to the South Area Hospital, the only place approved by Miguel, because the poorest of the poor were attended there. That sudden blindness had put the priest in a bad mood, he could not understand the divine design that made him an invalid just when his services were most needed. Christian resignation was not remembered. From the beginning, he refused to accept being guided or supported, preferring to stumble, even at the risk of falling, although it is at night, of the Chilean poet Carlos Bolton to take a bone, not so much for pride as to get used to this new limitation as soon as possible. Filomena gave secret instructions to the driver to divert the course and take them to the German Clinic, but his brother, who knew too well the smell of misery, became suspicious as soon as they crossed the threshold of the building and confirmed them when he heard music in The elevator, they must have pulled him out of there in a hurry, before a brawl broke out. In the hospital they waited for four hours, time that Miguel took advantage of to investigate the misfortunes of the other patients in the room, Filomena to start another vest and Gilberto to compose the poem about the

antennas for the black that had arisen in his heart the previous day . -The right eye has no remedy and to return some vision to the left one would have to operate again -said the doctor who finally attended them.

- He has already had three operations and the tissues are very weakened, this requires special techniques and instruments. I think the only place where they can try is at the Military Hospital ... - Never! Miguel interrupted. I will never put my feet in that den of thugs! Startled, the doctor winked apologetically at the nurse, who returned it with a knowing smile.

-Don't be crafty, Miguel. It will only be for a couple of days, I do not think that is a betrayal of your principles. Nobody goes to hell for that! Filomena pointed out, but her brother replied that he preferred to remain blind for the rest of his days, than to give the military the pleasure of returning his sight. At the door the doctor held him for an instant by the arm. _Look, Father Have you heard about the Opus Dei clinic? There they also have very modern resources.

-Opus De? exclaimed the priest. Did Opus Dei say? Filomena tried to drive him out of the office, but he locked himself in the doorway to inform the doctor that these people would not go and ask for a favor either.

-But how ... are not they Catholics? - They are reactionary Pharisees. "Excuse me," the doctor stammered. Once in the car Miguel zapped his brothers and the driver that Opus Dei was a fateful organization, more occupied in reassuring the conscience of the upper classes than in feeding those who die of hunger, and that more easily enters. a camel through the eye of a needle than a rich to the Kingdom of heaven, or something like that. He added that what happened was one more proof of how bad things were in the country, where only the privileged could be cured with dignity and others had to settle for herbs of mercy and poultices of humiliation. Finally, he asked to be taken straight to his house because he had to water the geraniums and prepare the Sunday sermon.

"I agree," Gilberto commented, depressed by the hours of waiting and by the sight of so much misfortune and such ugliness in the hospital. I was not used to these diligences.

- According to what? Filomena asked. -We can not go to the Military Hospital, It would be a shame. But we could give Opus Dei a chance, do not you think? -But what are you talking about! his brother replied. I already told you what I think of them.

- Anyone would say that we can not pay! Filomena added, about to lose patience.

"Nothing is lost by asking," suggested Gilberto, passing his perfumed handkerchief around his neck.

- Those people are so busy moving fortunes in the banks and embroidering chasubles of cure with threads of gold, that they do not have spirit to see the needs of others. The sky is not won with genuflections, but with ...

"But you are not poor, Don Miguelito," interrupted Sebastian Canuto, clinging to the steering wheel.

-Do not insult me, Knife. I'm as poor as you. Turn around and take us to the clinic, to prove to the poet that, as always, he walks on the moon. They were greeted by a kind lady, who had them fill out a form and offered them coffee. Fifteen minutes later the three of them went to the doctor's office.

"First of all, doctor, I want to know if you are also from Opus Dei or if you only work here," the priest said.

"I belong to the Work," smiled the doctor softly. -How much does the consult cost? The priest's tone did not hide the sarcasm.

-Do you have financial problems, Father? -Tell me how much. -Nothing, if you can not pay. Donations are voluntary. For a brief moment Father Boulton lost his composure, but the bewilderment did not last long.

-This does not seem like a charity work. -It's a private clinic. -Jay ... Here come only those who can make donations. "Look, Father, if you do not like it, I suggest you leave," the doctor replied. But it will not go away without me examining it. If he wants, he brings me all his proteges, that here we will attend to them as well as possible, for that they pay for what they have. And now do not move and open your eyes wide. After a meticulous review the doctor confirmed the previous diagnosis, but was not optimistic.

- Here we have an excellent team, but it is a very delicate operation. I can not fool you, Father, only a miracle can restore your sight, "he concluded. Miguel was so overwhelmed that he barely heard him, but Filomena clung to that hope.

- A miracle, he said? -Well, it's a way of talking, ma'am. The truth is that nobody can guarantee you will see again.

"If what you want is a miracle, I know where to get it," said Filomena, placing the fabric in her bag. Thank you very much doctor. Go prepare everything for the operation, soon we will be back.

Back in the car, with Miguel mute for the first time in a long time and Gilberto exhausted by the shocks of the day, Filomena ordered Sebastián Canuto to head towards the mountain. The man gave him a sidelong glance and smiled enthusiastically. He had driven his patron at other times in those directions and never did it willingly, because the road was a twisted snake, but this time he was encouraged by the idea of helping the man he most appreciated in this world. _Where Next? Gilberto murmured, using his British education to avoid collapsing with fatigue. -It is better that you fall asleep, the trip is long. Let's go to the grotto of Juana de los Lirios, "her sister explained. - You must be crazy! exclaimed the surprised priest.

-It's holy. - Those are pure nonsense. The Church has not pronounced on her.

-The Vatican takes about a hundred years to recognize a saint. We can not wait that long, "Filomena concluded.

-If Miguel does not believe in angels, he will not believe in pious Creoles, especially if that Juana comes from a family of landowners, Gilberto sighed.

-That has nothing to do, she lived in poverty. Do not put ideas in Miguel's head, "said Filomena.

"If it were not for his family's willingness to spend a fortune to have a saint of their own, no one would know of its existence," interrupted the priest.

-It's more miraculous than any of your foreign saints.

-In any case, it seems to me a lot of petulance to ask for special treatment. Evil that bad, I am nobody and I have no right to mobilize the sky with personal demands, "grumbled the blind man.

The prestige of Juana had begun after her death at a premature age, because the peasants of the region, impressed by her pious life and her works of charity, prayed to her asking for favors. Soon word spread that the deceased was capable of performing wonders and the matter was rising in tone until culminating in the Explorer's Miracle, as they called it. The man was lost in the Cordillera for two weeks, and when the rescue teams had abandoned the search and were about to declare him dead, he appeared exhausted and hungry, but intact. In his statements to the press, he said that in a dream he had seen the image of a girl dressed long with a bouquet of flowers in her arms. Upon awakening he felt a strong scent of lilies and knew without a doubt that it was a heavenly message. Following the penetrating perfume of the flowers, he managed to get out of that labyrinth of gorges and abysses and finally reach the outskirts

of a path. When comparing his vision with a portrait of Juana, he testified that they were identical. The girl's family was in charge of divulging the story, of building a grotto in the place where the explorer appeared and of mobilizing all the resources at his disposal to take the case to the Vatican. Until that moment, however, there was no response from the cardinal jury. The Holy See did not believe in hasty resolutions, it took many centuries of parsimonious exercise of power and hoped to have many more in the future, so that there was no hurry for anything, much less for beatifications. He received numerous testimonies from the South American continent, where from time to time appeared prophets, saints, preachers, stylites, martyrs, virgins, anchorites and other original characters whom people revered, but it was not something to get excited about each one. Great caution was required in these matters, because any setback could lead to ridicule, especially in these times of pragmatism, when unbelief prevailed over faith. However, the devotees of Juana did not await the verdict of Rome to treat her as a saint. Stamps and medals were sold with his portrait and every day ads were published in the newspapers thanking him for any favor granted. In the grotto they planted so many lilies that the smell stunned the pilgrims and rendered sterile to the surrounding domestic animals. Oil lamps, candles and torches filled the air with stubborn smoke and the echo of chants and prayers robbed the hills confusing the condors in flight. In a short time the place was filled with reminder plaques, all kinds of orthopedic devices and replicas of miniature human organs, which the believers left as proof of some supernatural healing. Through a public collection money was collected to pave the route and in a couple of years there was a road full of curves, but passable, linking the capital with the chapel.

The Boulton brothers arrived at their destination at nightfall. Sebastian Canuto helped the three elders to walk the path that led to the grotto. Despite the late hour, there was no lack of devotees, some were crawling on their knees on the stones, supported by a solicitous relative, others were praying aloud or lighting candles before a plaster statue of the Blessed. Filomena and El Cuchillo sank to make their request. Gilberto sat on a bench to think about the turns that life gives, and Miguel stood up mumbling that if it was a question of asking for miracles why they did not ask better than the tyrant should fall and democracy return once and for all. A few days later the doctors at the Opus Dei clinic operated on his left eye at no cost, after warning the brothers that they should not have too many illusions. The priest begged Filomena and Gilberto not to make any comment on Juana de los Lirios, she had enough with the humiliation of being helped by her ideological rivals. As soon as he was discharged, Filomena took him to his home, ignoring his protests. Miguel wore a huge patch covering half his face and was weakened by all that matter, but his vocation of modesty remained intact. He declared that he did not want to be treated by mercenary hands, so they had to dismiss the nurse hired for the occasion. Filomena and the faithful Sebastián Canuto took care of him, not a light task, because the patient was in a bad mood, he could not stand the bed and did not want to eat.

The presence of the priest altered in its essence the routines of the house. Opposing radios and the Voice of Moscow by short wave blasted at all hours and there was a perpetual parade of miserable settlers from the neighborhood of Miguel, who came to visit the patient. His room was filled with humble gifts: drawings of school children, cookies, clumps of herbs and flowers raised in tin cans, a hen for the soup and even a two-month-old puppy urinating on Persian rugs. and gnawed the legs of the furniture, and that someone took him with the idea of training him as a blind dog. However, the convalescence was rapid and fifty hours after the operation, Filomena called the doctor to inform her that her brother was seeing quite well.

-But I did not tell him not to touch the bandage! exclaimed the doctor.

-The patch still has it. Now go to the other eye, "explained the lady. - What other eye - The one on the side, well, doctor, the one that had died. -Can not be. I 'm coming. Do not move it for any reason! ordered the surgeon.

In the Boulton's house he found his patient very cheerful, eating potato chips and watching the telenovela with the dog on his knees. Incredulous, he saw that the priest saw without difficulty from the eye that had been blind for eight years, and when removing the bandage it was evident that he also saw through the operated eye. Father Miguel celebrated his seventy years in the parish of his neighborhood. Her sister Filomena and her friends formed a caravan of cars stuffed with cakes, cakes, sandwiches, fruit baskets and chocolate jars, headed by El Cuchillo, who carried liters of wine and brandy disguised in bottles of horchata. The priest drew in great roles the history of his hazardous life, and put them on the walls of the church. In them he had a touch of irony the ups and downs of his vocation, from the moment when the call of God hit him like a blow to the neck at fifteen, and his fight against the deadly sins, first those of gluttony and lust, and later that of anger, until his recent adventures in the police barracks, at an age when other old men swings in a rocking chair counting stars. He had hung a portrait of Joan, crowned by a garland of flowers, next to the red flags. The meeting began with a mass animated by four guitars, which all the neighbors attended. They put up loudspeakers so that the crowd overflowing in the street could follow the ceremony. After the blessing some people came forward to give testimony of a new case of abuse of authority, until Filomena advanced at great strides to announce that it was already good of laments and that it was time to have fun. They all went out to the patio, someone put on the music and immediately started dancing and eating. The ladies of the high district served the food, while El Cuchillo lit fireworks and the priest danced a charleston, surrounded by all his parishioners and friends, to show that not only could he see as an eagle, but also there was no one to match him in a party.

"These popular festivities have nothing to do with poetry," Gilberto observed after the third glass of fake horchata, but his English Lord's retorts could not conceal that he was enjoying himself.

-To see band-aid, tell us the miracle! someone shouted, and the rest of the audience joined in the request.

The priest silenced the music, the disorder of the clothes settled, with a swipe he crushed the few hairs that crowned his head and with his voice broken by gratitude he referred to Juana de los Lirios, without whose intervention all the artifices of science and technology would have been unsuccessful. "If it were at least a proletarian blessing, it would be easier to have confidence in her," a bold one said, and a general laugh echoed the comment. -Don't fuck me with the miracle, look at the saint's anger and I'm blinded again by whirligig! roared Father Miguel indignantly. And now, put yourselves all in line, because you are going to sign me a letter for the Pope! And so, in the midst of laughter and sips of wine, all the villagers signed the request for the beatification of Juana de los Lirios.

REVENGE

The radiant noon in which they crowned Dulce Rosa Orellano with the jasmine of the Queen of Carnival, the mothers of the other candidates muttered that it was an unfair prize, that they gave it to her only because she was the daughter of Senator Anselmo Orellano, the most powerful man in the entire province. They admitted that the girl was graceful, played the piano and danced like no other, but there were other postulants to that award much more beautiful. They saw her standing on the dais, in her organza dress and her flower wreath waving to the crowd and cursing her under her breath. Therefore, some of them were happy when months later the misfortune entered the Orellano house sowing so much fatality that it took twenty-five years to harvest it.

On the night of the queen's election, there was a dance at the City Hall of Santa Teresa and young people from remote villages came to meet Dulce Rosa. She was so happy and danced with such lightness that many did not perceive that she was not really the most beautiful, and when they returned to their games, they said that they had never seen a face like his. Thus he acquired an undeserved fame of beauty and no subsequent testimony could deny it. The exaggerated description of her translucent skin and her clear eyes, passed from mouth to mouth and each one added something of her own fantasy. The poets of remote cities composed sonnets for a hypothetical maiden named Dulce Rosa.

The rumor of that beauty blooming in the house of Senator Orellano also reached the ears of Tadeo Cespedes, who never imagined knowing her, because in the years of her existence she had not had time to learn verses or look at women. He dealt only with the Civil War. Since he started shaving his mustache he had a gun in his hand and he had lived for a long time in the din of gunpowder. He had forgotten his mother's kisses and even the songs of the mass. He did not always have reasons to offer a fight, because in some periods of truce there were no adversaries available to his gang, but even in those times of forced peace he lived like a corsair. He was a man habituated to violence. He crossed the country in all directions fighting against visible enemies, when there were them, and against the shadows, when he had to invent them, and thus he would have continued if his party does not win the presidential elections. From one night to the next, he went from hiding to taking charge of power and his pretexts were finished to continue stirring up.

The last mission of Tadeo Céspedes was the punitive expedition to Santa Teresa. With one hundred and twenty men entered the town at night to give a lesson and eliminate the leaders of the opposition. They battered the windows of the public buildings, smashed the church door and got on horseback to the high altar, crushing Father Clemente who was planted in front of them, and galloped on with a crash of war in the direction of the village. Senator Orellano, who stood proudly on the hill.

At the head of a dozen loyal servants, the Senator waited for Tadeo Cespedes, after locking his daughter in the last room of the patio and letting go of the dogs. At that time he regretted, as so many other times in his life, not having male descendants to help him take up arms and defend the honor of his home. He felt very old, but he did not have time to think about it, because he saw on the slopes of the hill the terrible flash of one hundred and twenty torches approaching, shooing the night. He distributed the last ammunition in silence. Everything was said and everyone knew that before dawn he should die like a male in his fighting position.

"The last one will take the key to the room where my daughter is and she will do her duty," said the Senator when he heard the first shots.

All those men had seen Dulce Rosa born and they had her on her knees when she was just walking, they told her tales of people who appeared on winter evenings, they heard her play the piano and

they applauded her excitedly on the day of her coronation as Carnival Queen. Her father could die peacefully, because the girl would never fall alive in the hands of Tadeo Cespedes. The only thing that Senator Orellano never thought was that despite his recklessness in battle, the last to die would be him. He saw his friends fall one by one and he finally understood the futility of continuing to resist. He had a bullet in his belly and a diffuse sight, he could barely make out the shadows climbing the high walls of his property, but his understanding failed to crawl to the third patio. The dogs recognized his scent through the sweat, blood and sadness that covered him and moved away to let him pass. He put the key in the lock, opened the heavy door and through the fog in his eyes saw Dulce Rosa waiting for him. The girl wore the same organza dress used at the Carnival party and had adorned her hairstyle with the flowers of the crown.

"It's time, daughter," he said, triggering the weapon while a pool of blood grew at his feet.

"Do not kill me, father," she said in a firm voice. Leave me alive, to avenge it and to avenge me. Senator Anselmo Orellano observed his daughter's fifteen-year-old face and imagined what Tadeo Cespedes would do to her, but there was great strength in the transparent eyes of Dulce Rosa and he knew that he could survive to punish his executioner. The girl sat on the bed and he took place at her side, pointing to the door.

When the bustle of the dying dogs fell silent, the bar gave way, the latch jumped and the first men broke into the room, the Senator managed to shoot six times before losing consciousness. Tadeo Cespedes thought he was dreaming when he saw an angel crowned with jasmine holding an old dying man in his arms, while his white dress was drenched in red, but he did not have mercy for a second look, because he was drunk with violence and enervated by several hours of combat.

"The woman is for me," he said before his men laid their hands on him. It dawned on a leaden Friday, tinged by the glow of the fire. The silence was dense on the hill. The last moans had stopped when Dulce Rosa was able to stand up and walk towards the fountain in the garden, which the previous day was surrounded by magnolias and now was just a tumultuous puddle in the middle of the rubble. There was nothing left of the dress but tatters of organza, which she took off slowly to be naked. He immersed himself in the cold water. The sun appeared among the birches and the girl could see the water turning pink when washing the blood that flowed between her legs and that of her father, which had dried in his hair. Once clean, serene and without tears, returned to the house in ruins, looked for something to cover, took a sheet of twine and went to the road to collect the remains of the Senator. They had bound him by the feet to gallop him down the hillsides to a wretched shambles, but, guided by love, his daughter could recognize him without hesitation. He wrapped him in the cloth and sat next to him to watch the day grow. This is how the neighbors of Santa Teresa found it when they dared to go up to the village of Orellano. They helped Dulce Rosa to bury her dead and to put out the vestiges of the fire and begged her to go live with her godmother to another town, where nobody knew her story, but she refused. Then they formed crews to rebuild the house and gave him six wild dogs to take care of her.

From the moment they took his father still alive, and Tadeo Cespedes closed the door behind him and released his leather belt, Dulce Rosa lived to get revenge. In the following years that thought kept her awake at night and occupied her days, but she did not completely erase her laughter or dry up her good will. It increased its reputation of beauty, because the singers were everywhere proclaiming their imaginary charms, until turning it into a living legend. She got up every day at four o'clock in the morning to direct the tasks of the field and the house, to go around her property on the back of a beast, to buy and sell with Syrian bargains, to raise animals and to cultivate the magnolias and jasmine in her garden. At dusk he would take off his pants, boots and weapons and put on his fine clothes, brought from the capital

in aromatic trunks. At dusk, his visits began to arrive and they found her playing the piano, while the servants prepared the trays of cakes and the glasses of horchata. At first many wondered how it was possible that the young woman had not ended up in a straitjacket in the sanatorium or as a novice in the Carmelite nuns, however, as there were frequent parties in the town of Orellano, eventually people left to talk about the tragedy and the memory of the murdered Senator was erased. Some gentlemen of renown and fortune managed to overcome the stigma of rape and, attracted by the prestige of beauty and good sense of Dulce Rosa, proposed marriage. She rejected them all, because her mission in this world was revenge.

Tadeo Cespedes could not get out of his memory that fateful night either. The hangover from the slaughter and the euphoria of the rape was passed to him a few hours later, when he was on his way to the capital to render an account of his expedition of punishment. Then came to mind the girl dressed in dance and crowned with jasmine, who endured in silence in that dark room where the air was impregnated with the smell of gunpowder. He saw her again at the final moment, lying on the floor, badly covered by his reddened rags, sunk in the compassionate sleep of unconsciousness and so he continued to see her every night at the moment of sleep, for the rest of his life. Peace, the exercise of government and the use of power, made him a restful and industrious man. With the passage of time the memories of the Civil War were lost and people began to call him Don Tadeo. He bought a farm on the other side of the sierra, dedicated himself to administer justice and ended up as mayor. If it had not been for the tireless ghost of Dulce Rosa Orellano, perhaps she would have achieved some happiness, but in all the women who crossed her path, in all those she embraced in search of consolation and in all the loves pursued throughout over the years, the face of the Carnival Queen appeared. And to his great disgrace, the songs that sometimes brought his name in verses of popular poets did not allow him to remove it from his heart. The image of the girl grew inside him, occupying him entirely, until one day he could not take it anymore. He was at the head of a long banquet table celebrating his fifty-seven years, surrounded by friends and collaborators, when he thought he saw on the tablecloth a naked creature among jasmine blossoms and realized that nightmare would not leave him alone or afterwards. dead. He struck a fist that made the crockery shake and ordered his hat and cane.

- Where are you going, Don Tadeo? asked the Prefect. "To repair an old damage," he said, leaving without saying goodbye to anyone. He did not need to look for it, because he always knew that he was in the same house of his misery and there he directed his car. By then there were good roads and distances seemed shorter. The landscape had changed in those decades, but when the last curve of the hill appeared the village as he remembered it before his gang took it by storm. There were the solid walls of river stone that he destroyed with dynamite charges, there the old coffered ceilings of dark wood that caught fire, there the trees of which hung the bodies of the men of the Senator, there the yard where he massacred the dogs. He stopped his vehicle a hundred meters from the door and did not dare to continue, because he felt his heart exploding inside his chest. He was going to turn around to go back where he had come, when a figure wrapped in the halo of her skirts appeared among the roses. He closed his eyelids, wishing with all his strength that she would not recognize him. In the soft light of the six, she perceived Dulce Rosa Orellano, who was floating along the paths of the garden. He noticed his hair, his clear face, the harmony of his gestures, the commotion of his dress and he thought he was suspended in a dream that lasted twenty-five years.

"At last you come, Tadeo Cespedes," she said when she saw him, not being fooled by his black mayor's suit or his gray knight hair, because he still had the same pirate's hands. -You persecuted me without truce. I have not been able to love anyone in my whole life, only you, "he murmured, his voice

broken by shame. Dulce Rosa Orellano sighed contentedly. He had called him with the thought of day and night during all that time and was finally there. His time had arrived. But he looked into his eyes and found no sign of the executioner, only fresh tears. He searched in his own heart for hatred cultivated throughout his life and was not able to find it. She evoked the moment in which she asked her father for the sacrifice of leaving her alive to fulfill a duty, revived the hug so many times cursed of that man and the early morning in which she wrapped some sad remains in a twine sheet. He reviewed the perfect plan of his revenge but did not feel the expected joy, but, on the contrary, a deep melancholy. Tadeo Cespedes turned his hand delicately and kissed the palm, wetting it with his weeping. Then she understood terrified that by thinking so much of him at every moment, savoring the punishment in advance, the feeling was turned around and she ended up loving him. In the following days both raised the floodgates of repressed love and for the first time in their harsh destinies opened to receive the proximity of the other. They walked through the gardens talking about themselves, without omitting the fatal night that turned the course of their lives. At dusk, she played the piano and he smoked listening to her until she felt the soft bones and happiness enveloping him like a cloak and erase the nightmares of the past. After dinner, Tadeo Cespedes left for Santa Teresa, where nobody remembered the old horror story. He stayed in the best hotel and from there he organized his wedding, he wanted a party with fanfare, waste and bustle, in which all the people participated. He discovered love at an age when other men have lost the illusion and that gave him back the strength of his youth. He wanted to surround Dulce Rosa with affection and beauty, to give her all the things that money could buy, to see if he could compensate in his years of old, the evil that he did when he was young. In some moments the panic invaded him. He would peek at her face for the signs of resentment, but he only saw the light of shared love and that restored his confidence. That's how a month of happiness happened. Two days before the wedding, when they were already setting up the party tables in the garden, killing the birds and pigs for the feast and cutting the flowers to decorate the house, Dulce Rosa Orellano tried on the wedding dress. She was reflected in the mirror, so similar to the day of her coronation as Carnival Queen, that she could not continue to cheat her own heart. He knew that he could never carry out the planned revenge because he loved the murderer, but he could not silence the senator's ghost either, so he dismissed the seamstress, took the scissors and went to the room.

third patio that during all that time had remained unoccupied. Tadeo Cespedes searched for her everywhere, calling her desperate. The barking of the dogs led him to the other end of the house. With the help of the gardeners he threw down the locked door and entered the room where he once saw an angel crowned with jasmine. He found Dulce Rosa Orellano as he saw her in his dreams every night of his existence, in the same bloody organza dress, and he guessed that he would live until he was ninety years old, to pay his guilt with the memory of the only woman his spirit could love.

LETTERS OF BETRAYED LOVE

The mother of Analía Torres died of a delirious fever when she was born and her father could not stand the sadness and two weeks later he was shot in the chest with a pistol. He agonized several days with his wife's name on his lips. His brother Eugenio administered the family lands and disposed of the destiny of the little orphan according to his criteria. Until the age of six, Analía grew clinging to the skirts of an Indian mistress in the quarters of her guardian's house and later, when she was old enough to go to school, they sent her to the capital, in the Sisters School. of the Sacred Heart, where he spent the next twelve years. She was a good student and loved the discipline, the austerity of the stone building, the chapel with its court of saints and its scent of wax and lilies, the naked corridors, the shady courtyards. What attracted her the least was the bustle of the pupils and the pungent smell of the classrooms. Every time she managed to outwit the nuns' vigilance, she hid in the attic, among decapitated statues and broken furniture, to tell stories to herself. In those stolen moments he immersed himself in silence with the feeling of abandoning himself to a sin. Every six months she received a brief note from her uncle Eugenio recommending that she behave herself and honor the memory of her parents, who had been two good Christians in life and would be proud that her only daughter dedicated her life to the highest precepts of the virtue, that is, entered as a novice to the convent. But Analía let him know from the first hint that she was not willing to do it and kept her position firmly just to contradict him, because deep down she liked religious life. Hidden behind the habit, in the ultimate solitude of renouncing any pleasure, perhaps I could find lasting peace, I thought; however, his instincts warned him against the advice of his tutor. He suspected that his actions were motivated by the greed of the lands, rather than by family loyalty. Nothing from him seemed worthy of trust, in some crack was the trap.

When she was sixteen years old, her uncle went to visit her at school for the first time. The Mother Superior called the girl to her office and had to present them, because both had changed a lot since the time of the Indian mistress in the backyards and they did not recognize each other.

"I see that the Little Sisters have taken good care of you, Analia," said the uncle, stirring his chocolate cup. You look healthy and even pretty. In my last letter I notified you that from the date of this birthday you will receive a monthly sum for your expenses, as stipulated in your will by my brother, may he rest in peace.

-How much? - One hundred pesos. Is that all my parents left? -Of course not. You already know that the hacienda belongs to you, but agriculture is not a task for a woman, especially in these times of strikes and revolutions. For the moment I will send you a monthly payment that I will increase every year, until you become of age. We will see later.

- We'll see what, uncle? -We will see what is best for you. -What are my alternatives? -You always need a man to manage the field, girl. I have done it all these years and it has not been an easy task, but it is my obligation, I promised it to my brother in his last hour and I am willing to continue doing it for you. "You should not do it for much longer, uncle. When I get married, I'll take care of my lands.

"When you marry," said the girl? Tell me, Mother, do you have any suitor? - How come, Mr. Torres! We take great care of the girls. It's just a way to talk. What things does this girl say! Analía Torres stood up, stretched out.

Uniform folds, he made a brief, rather mocking bow and left. The Mother Superior served more chocolate to the gentleman, commenting that the only explanation for this discourteous behavior was the little contact that the young woman had with her relatives.

"She's the only student who never goes on vacation and who has never been sent a Christmas present," the nun said dryly.

"I am not a man of my own, but I assure you that I esteem my niece very much and have taken care of her interests as a father. But you are right, Analía needs more affection, women are sentimental.

Before thirty days the uncle appeared again in the school, but this time he did not ask to see his niece, he just notified the Mother Superior that his own son wished to correspond with Analía and beg him to send him the letters to see if the camaraderie with his cousin reinforced the bonds of the family. The letters began to arrive regularly. Simple white paper and black ink, a writing of large and precise strokes. Some spoke of life in the countryside, of the seasons and animals, others of dead poets and the thoughts they wrote. Sometimes the envelope included a book or a drawing made with the same firm strokes of calligraphy. Analía proposed not to read them, faithful to the idea that anything related to her uncle hid any danger, but in the boredom of the school the letters represented her only possibility of flying. He hid in the attic, not to invent improbable stories, but to reread with avidity the notes sent by his cousin until he knew by heart the inclination of the letters and the texture of the paper. At first he did not answer them, but after a while he could not stop doing it. The content of the letters became increasingly useful to circumvent the censure of the Mother Superior, who opened all correspondence. They grew intimate between the two and soon they managed to agree on a secret code with which they began to talk about love. Analía Torres did not remember ever seeing that cousin who signed Luis, because when she lived in her uncle's house the boy was an intern in a school in the capital. She was sure that he must be an ugly man, perhaps sickly deformed, because it seemed impossible to him that such a deep sensibility and such precise intelligence should be combined with an attractive aspect. He tried to draw an image of the cousin in his mind: plump as his father with his pockmarked face, lame and bald; but the more defects he added the more inclined to love him. The brightness of the spirit was the only important thing, the only thing that would withstand the passage of time without deterioration and would grow over the years, the beauty of those utopian heroes of the stories had no value and could even become a source of frivolity, concluded the girl, although she could not avoid a shadow of uneasiness in her reasoning. He wondered how much deformity he would be able to tolerate. The correspondence between Analía and Luis Torres lasted two years, after which the girl had a hat box full of envelopes and the soul definitely delivered. If it crossed his mind the idea that this relationship could be a plan of his uncle so that the goods she had inherited from his father passed into the hands of Luis, discarded immediately, ashamed of his own pettiness. On the day she turned eighteen, the Mother Superior called her to the refectory because there was a visit waiting for her. Analía Torres guessed who she was and was about to run to hide in the attic of the forgotten saints, terrified at the eventuality of finally facing the man she had imagined for so long. When he entered the room and was in front of him, he needed several minutes to overcome the disappointment. Luis Torres was not the twisted dwarf that she had built in dreams and had learned to love. He was a well-planted man, with a friendly face with features

regular, the mouth still childish, a dark and well-groomed beard, clear eyes with long eyelashes, but empty of expression. He looked a bit like the saints in the chapel, too pretty and a little dumb. Analía recovered from the impact and decided that if she had accepted a hunchback in her heart, with even greater reason she could love this elegant young man who kissed her on the cheek leaving a trail of lavender on her nose.

From the first day of her marriage Analía detested Luis Torres. When he crushed her between the sheets embroidered on a bed that was too soft, he knew that he had fallen in love with a ghost and that he could never transfer that imaginary passion to the reality of his marriage. He fought his feelings with

determination, first dismissing them as a vice and then, when it was impossible to continue ignoring them, trying to get to the bottom of his own soul to tear them out by the roots. Luis was gentle and even funny at times, he did not bother her with disproportionate demands, nor did he try to change his tendency to loneliness and silence. She herself admitted that with a little goodwill on her part she could find in that relationship a certain happiness, at least as much as she would have gotten from a nun's habit. I had no precise reason for that strange repulsion for the man I had loved for two years without knowing. He also could not put his emotions into words, but if he could have done it he would not have had anyone to comment on. She was mocked at not being able to reconcile the image of the epistolary suitor with that of the flesh and blood husband. Luis never mentioned the letters and when she touched the subject, he would close his mouth with a quick kiss and some light observation on that romanticism so inappropriate to married life, in which trust, respect, common interests and The future of the family mattered much more than a correspondence of teenagers. There was no true intimacy between the two. During the day each one worked in their chores and at night they were among the feather pillows, where Analía-accustomed to her school bed-thought she would suffocate. Sometimes they embraced in a hurry, she immobile and tense, he with the attitude of someone who fulfills a demand of the body because he can not help it. Luis fell asleep immediately, she kept her eyes open in the dark and a protest crossed her throat. Analía tried various means to overcome the rejection that he inspired, from the recourse to fix in memory each detail of her husband with the purpose of loving him by sheer determination, to emptying the mind of all thoughts and moving to a dimension where he could not reach her. He prayed that it would be only a transitory repugnance, but the months passed and instead of the expected relief the animosity grew into hatred. One night she found herself dreaming of a horrible man who caressed her with fingers stained with black ink.

The Torres spouses lived on the property acquired by Analía's father when that was still a half-wild region, land of soldiers and bandits. Now it was next to the road and a short distance from a prosperous town, where agricultural and livestock fairs were held every year. Legally Luis was the administrator of the estate, but in reality it was Uncle Eugenio who fulfilled that function, because Luis was bored by the affairs of the field. After lunch, when father and son settled in the library to drink cognac and play dominoes, Analía heard her uncle decide on investments, animals, plantings and harvests. On the rare occasions when she dared to intervene to give an opinion, the two men listened to her with apparent attention, assuring her that they would take his suggestions into account, but then acted upon her. Sometimes Analía would gallop through the paddocks to the edge of the mountain, wishing she had been a man.

The birth of a son did nothing to improve Analía's feelings for her husband.

During the months of gestation his withdrawn character was accentuated, but Luis did not become impatient, attributing it to his state. Anyway, he had other issues to think about. After giving birth, she settled in another room, furnished only with a narrow, hard bed. When the son turned one year old and the mother still locked the door to her room and avoided all occasion to be alone with him, Luis decided that it was time to demand a more considerate treatment and warned his wife that more It was worth changing his attitude, before he broke the door with bullets. She had never seen him so violent. He obeyed without comment. In the following seven years the tension between them increased in such a way that they ended up becoming overlapped enemies, but they were people of good manners and in front of others they treated with exaggerated courtesy. Only the child suspected the size of the hostility between his parents and woke up at midnight crying, with the bed wet. Analía covered herself with a breastplate of silence and little by little it seemed to dry inside. Luis, on the other hand, became more expansive and

frivolous, abandoned himself to his multiple appetites, drank too much and used to lose himself for several days in unspeakable pranks. Later, when she stopped hiding her acts of dissipation, Analía found good pretexts to get further away from him. Luis lost all interest in the tasks of the field and his wife replaced him, happy with that new position. On Sundays Uncle Eugenio stayed in the dining room discussing the decisions with her, while Luis sank into a long nap, from which he rose again in the evening, drenched with sweat and with an upset stomach, but always ready to go off again. with your friends.

Analía taught her son the rudiments of writing and arithmetic and tried to initiate it into a taste for books. When the boy turned seven Luis decided that it was time to give him a more formal education, far from the mother's mimes, and he wanted to send him to a school in the capital, to see if he became a man in a hurry, but Analía was He put ahead with such ferocity, that he had to accept a less drastic solution. He took it to the village school, where he stayed interned Monday through Friday, but on Saturday morning the car went to look for him to return home until Sunday. The first week Analía observed her son full of anxiety, looking for reasons to keep him at his side, but he could not find them. The creature seemed happy, spoke of his teacher and his companions with genuine enthusiasm, as if he had been born among them. He stopped urinating on the bed. Three months later he arrived with his report card and a short letter from the professor congratulating him on his good performance. Analía read it trembling and smiled for the first time in a long time. He embraced his moved son, questioning him about every detail, how the dormitorios were, what they fed him, if it was cold at night, how many friends he had, how was his teacher. She seemed much calmer and did not talk about getting him out of school again. In the following months the boy always brought good grades, which Analía collected as treasures and rewarded with jam jars and fruit baskets for the whole class. I tried not to think that this solution was barely enough for primary education, that in a few years it would be inevitable to send the child to a school in the city and she could only see it during the holidays.

In a night of pelotera in the town Luis Torres, that had drunk too much, it was arranged to do pirouettes in a horse other people's to demonstrate its ability of rider before a group of tavern cronies. The animal threw him to the ground and kicked his testicles with a kick. Nine days later Torres died howling in pain at a clinic in the capital, where he was taken in the hope of saving him from infection. At his side was his wife, crying with guilt for the love he could never give her and relief because he would no longer have to pray for her to die. Before returning to the field with her body in a coffin to bury her in her own land, Analía bought herself a white dress and put it in the back of her breast. The people arrived in mourning, with their faces covered by a widow's veil so that no one could see the expression of their eyes, and in the same way they appeared at the funeral, in the hands of their son, also in a black suit. At the end of the ceremony, Uncle Eugenio, who remained very healthy despite his seventy well-spent years, proposed to his daughter-in-law to give him the land and go live on his income to the city, where the child would finish his education and she could forget the sorrows of the past.

"Because it does not escape me, Analía, that my poor Luis and you were never happy," he said. - You're right, uncle. Luis cheated on me from the beginning. -Pos God, daughter, he was always very discreet and respectful with you. Luis was a good husband. All men have small adventures, but that does not matter at all. -I do not mean that, but to an irremediable deception. -I do not want to know what it is about. In any case, I think that in the capital the child and you will be much better. Nothing will be missing. I'll take care of the property, I'm old but not finished and I can still turn a bull.

-I will stay here. My son will stay too, because he has to help me in the field. In recent years I have worked more in pastures than in the house. The only difference will be that now I will make my decisions without consulting anyone. At last this land is mine alone. Goodbye, uncle Eugenio.

In the first weeks Analía organized her new life. She started by burning the sheets she had shared with her husband and moving her narrow bed to the main room; He immediately studied the property administration books, and as soon as he had an accurate idea of his property, he looked for a foreman to execute his orders without asking questions. When she felt that she had all the reins under control, she looked for her white dress in the suitcase, ironed it carefully, put it on and so dressed she went in her car to the town school, carrying an old box of hats under her arm.

Analía Torres waited in the patio for the five o'clock bell to announce the end of the last class of the afternoon and the crowd of children to go out to recess. Among them came his son in a happy career, who saw her stopped in his tracks, because it was the first time his mother appeared at school.

"Show me your classroom, I want to meet your teacher," she said.

At the door Analía told the boy to leave, because that was a private matter, and she went alone. It was a large room with high ceilings, with maps and biology drawings on the walls. There was the same smell of confinement and the sweat of children that had marked his own childhood, but this time it did not bother him, on the contrary, he sucked it with pleasure. The desks were disordered by the day of use, there were some papers on the floor and open inkwells. He managed to see a column of numbers on the board. In the background, on a desk on a platform, was the teacher. The man raised his face in surprise and did not stand up, because his crutches were in a corner, too far to reach without dragging the chair. Analía crossed the corridor between two rows of desks and stopped in front of him.

"I'm Torres's mother," he said because he could not think of anything better.

-Good evening Madam. I take this opportunity to thank you for the sweets and fruits that you have sent us. -Let's leave that, I did not come for courtesies. I came to ask for accounts, "said Analía, placing the hat box on the table. -What is this? She opened the box and took out the love letters she had kept all that time. For a long moment he looked around on that hill of envelopes.

"You owe me eleven years of my life," said Analía. -How did you know that I wrote them? - he stammered when he managed to get the voice that had stuck somewhere. -The same day of my marriage I discovered that my husband could not have written them and when my son brought home his first notes, I recognized the calligraphy. And now that I'm looking at it, I do not have the slightest doubt, because I've seen you in my dreams since I was sixteen. Why did he do it? -Luis Torres was my friend and when he asked me to write a letter for his cousin I did not think there was anything wrong with it. So it was with the second and the third; later, when you answered me 'I could not go back Those two years were the best days of my life, the only ones I've expected some of. I was waiting for the mail. -AHA. -Can you forgive me? "It depends on you," said Analía, passing him the crutches. The teacher put on his jacket and got up. The two went out into the bustle of the courtyard, where the sun had not yet set.

PHANTOM PLACE

Five centuries ago when the brave outlaws of Spain, with their exhausted horses and armor hot as embers for the American sun, stepped on the lands of Quinaroo, and the Indians had been born and died in the same place for several thousand years. The conquistadores announced with heralds and flags the discovery of this new territory, declared it property of a remote emperor, planted the first cross and baptized it San Jerónimo, unpronounceable name in the language of the natives. The Indians observed these arrogant ceremonies a little surprised, but they had already received news about those bearded warriors that roamed the world with their rattle of irons and gunpowder, they had heard that in their wake they were wailing and that no known people had been able to face them, all the armies succumbed to that handful of centaurs. They were an ancient tribe, so poor that even the most feathered monarch did not bother to demand taxes from them, and so tame they did not recruit them for war. They had existed in peace since the dawn of time and were not willing to change their habits because of rude foreigners. Soon, however, they perceived the size of the enemy and understood the futility of ignoring them, because their presence was oppressive, like a large stone loaded on their backs. In the following years, the Indians who did not die in slavery or under the various tortures destined to implant other gods, or victims of unknown diseases, dispersed into the jungle and little by little lost even the name of their people. Always hidden, like shadows among the foliage, they were kept for centuries talking in whispers and mobilizing at night. They became so skilled in the art of dissimulation, that history did not record them and today there is no evidence of their passage through life. The books do not mention them, but the peasants of the region say that they have heard them in the forest and whenever a single young woman starts to grow up and they can not point to the seducer, they attribute the child to the spirit of a concupiscent Indian. The people of the place are proud to bring some drops of blood from those invisible beings, in the midst of the mixed torrent of English pirate, Spanish soldier, African slave, adventurer in search of El Dorado and after how many immigrants managed to arrive by those sides with his saddlebag on his shoulder and his head full of illusions. Europe consumed more coffee, cocoa and bananas than we could produce, but all that demand did not bring us good times, we are still as poor as ever. The situation turned upside down when a black man from the coast stuck a pick in the ground to make a well and a jet of oil jumped into his face. By the end of the First World War the idea had spread that this was a prosperous country, although almost all of its inhabitants still dragged their feet in the mud. In truth gold only filled the coffers of the Benefactor and his entourage, but there was hope that one day it would surpass something for the people. Two decades of totalitarian democracy were fulfilled, as the President Vitalicio called his government, during which every hint of subversion had been crushed, for its greater glory. In the capital there were signs of progress, motor cars, cinematographs, ice cream parlors, a racecourse and a theater where shows were presented brought from New York or Paris. Every day, dozens of ships took the oil and others brought novelties, but the rest of the territory continued to be drowned for centuries.

One day the people of San Jerónimo awoke from the siesta with the tremendous hammer blows that presided over the arrival of the railroad. The rails would link the capital with that hamlet, chosen by The Benefactor to build his Summer Palace, in the style of the European monarchs, although no one knew how to distinguish the summer from the winter, all the year passed in the humid and burning breath of nature. The only reason to raise that monumental work there was that a Belgian naturalist affirmed that if the myth of the earthly Paradise had some foundation, it must have been in that place, where the landscape was of a marvelous beauty. According to his observations the forest harbored more than a

thousand varieties of multicolored birds and all kinds of wild orchids, from the Brassias, as big as a hat, to the tiny Pleurothallis, visible only under a magnifying glass.

The idea of the palace came from some Italian builders, who presented themselves before His Excellency with the plans of a motley marble villa, a labyrinth of innumerable columns, wide corridors, curved staircases, arches, vaults and capitals, living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and more than thirty bathrooms decorated with gold and silver keys. The railroad was the first stage of the work, indispensable to transport until that corner of the map the tons of materials and the hundreds of workers, plus the foremen and craftsmen brought from Italy. The task of lifting this puzzle lasted four years, altered the flora and fauna and had a cost as high as all the warships of the national fleet, but was paid promptly with the dark oil of the earth, and the anniversary day of the Glorious Take of Power cut the ribbon that inaugurated the Summer Palace. For that occasion the locomotive of the train was decorated with the colors of the flag and the * Wagons of load were replaced by passenger cars covered in plush and English leather, where the guests traveled in formal dress, including some members of the oldest aristocracy, who although they detested that heartless Andean who had usurped the government, did not dare refuse their invitation. The Benefactor was a rough man, of peasant habits, he bathed in cold water, slept on a mat on the ground with his pistol at hand and put on his boots, ate roast meat and corn, drank only water and coffee. His only luxury was the cigars of black tobacco, all the others seemed vices of degenerates or queers, including alcohol, which looked with evil eyes and rarely offered at your table. However, over time he had to accept some refinements around him, because he understood the need to impress diplomats and other eminent visitors, not to give him abroad the reputation of a barbarian. He did not have a wife to influence his Spartan behavior. He considered love to be a dangerous weakness, he was convinced that all women, except his own mother, were potentially perverse and it was prudent to keep them at a distance. He said that a man sleeping in a loving embrace was as vulnerable as a seven-month-old, so he demanded that his generals live in the barracks, limiting his family life to sporadic visits. No woman had spent a full night in her bed nor could she boast of anything other than a hurried encounter, none left lasting marks until Marcia Lieberman appeared at her destination.

The opening party of the Summer Palace was an event in the annals of the government of the Benefactor. For two days and nights the orchestras took turns playing the fashionable rhythms and the cooks prepared an endless banquet. The most beautiful mulattas of the Caribbean, dressed in splendid dresses made for the occasion, danced in the halls with soldiers who had never participated in any battle, but had their chest covered with medals. There were all kinds of diversions: singers brought from Havana and New Orleans, flamenco dancers, magicians, jugglers and trapeze artists, card games and dominoes and even a rabbit hunt,

that the servants took out of their cages to run, and that the guests chased with race greyhounds, all of which culminated when a graceful shotgun killed the black-necked swans of the lagoon. Some guests fell on the furniture, drunk with cumbias and liquor, while others threw themselves into the pool or dispersed in pairs through the rooms. The Benefactor did not want to know the details. After welcoming his guests with a brief speech and beginning the dance of the arm of the lady of greater Hierarchy, he had returned to the capital without saying goodbye to anyone. The parties put him in a bad mood. On the third day the train made the return trip taking away the exhausted diners. The Summer Palace was in a calamitous state, the bathrooms looked like mules, the curtains dripped with urine, the furniture splattered and the plants dying in their flowerpots. The employees needed a week to clean up the remains of that hurricane.

The Palace did not return to be the scene of Bacchanalia. From time to time The Benefactor was driven there to get away from the pressures of his position, but his rest did not last more than three or four days for fear that in his absence the conspiracy would grow. The government required his permanent vigilance so that power would not slip through his hands. Only the personnel in charge of its maintenance remained in the huge building. When the crash of the construction machines and the passing of the train ended, and when the echo of the inaugural party was silenced, the landscape recovered its calm and the orchids bloomed again and the birds nested. The inhabitants of San Jerónimo resumed their habitual tasks and almost managed to forget the presence of the Summer Palace. Then, slowly, the invisible Indians returned to occupy their territory.

The first signs were so discreet that no one paid attention: steps and murmurs, fleeting silhouettes between the columns, the imprint of a hand on the clear surface of a table. Little by little began to disappear food from the kitchens and bottles of the cellars, in the morning some beds appeared revolts. The employees blamed each other, but refrained from raising their voices, because it was not convenient for the officer on duty to take matters into their own hands. It was impossible to keep an eye on the entire extension of that house, while they searched a room, in the one next to it there were sighs, but when they opened the door they only found shaking curtains, as if someone had just passed through them. The rumor spread that the Palace was haunted and soon the fear also reached the soldiers, who stopped making nocturnal rounds and simply remained motionless at their posts, scanning the landscape, clinging to their weapons. Scared, the servants no longer went down to the cellars and as a precaution closed several rooms with a key. They occupied the kitchen and slept in one wing of the building. The rest of the mansion was left unguarded, in the possession of those disembodied Indians, who had divided the rooms with illusory lines and had settled there as mischievous spirits. They had resisted the passage of history, adapting to the changes when it was inevitable and hiding in their own dimension when necessary. In the rooms of the Palace they found refuge, there they loved each other without noise, they were born without celebrations and they died without tears. They learned so well all the intricacies of that marble maze, that they could exist without inconveniences in the same space with the guards and the service personnel without ever touching, as if they belonged to another time.

Ambassador Lieberman landed at the port with his wife and a cargo of gear. He traveled with his dogs, with all his furniture, his library, his collection of opera records and all kinds of sports equipment, including a sailboat. Since announcing his new destination began to detest that country. I left

his position as Minister Counselor in Vienna, driven by the ambition to become ambassador, even if it was in South America, a bizarre land that did not inspire him any sympathy. Instead Marcia, his wife, took the matter with better humor. She was willing to follow her husband on his diplomatic pilgrimage, despite the fact that she felt more and more distant from him every day and that worldly affairs interested her very little, because at her side she had great freedom. It was enough to meet certain minimum requirements of a wife and the rest of the time belonged to him. In truth, her husband, who was too busy with his work and sports, barely noticed his existence, only noticed it when he was absent. For Lieberman his wife was an indispensable complement in his career, he gave him shine in social life and efficiently handled his complicated domestic train. She considered her a loyal partner, but until then she had not had the slightest concern to know her sensitivity. Marcia consulted maps and an encyclopedia to find out about this distant nation and began studying Spanish. During the two weeks of crossing the Atlantic, she read the books of the Belgian naturalist and before meeting her, she was already in love with that hot geography. She was of a withdrawn temperament, was happier in cultivating her garden than in the halls

where she had to accompany her husband, and deduced that in that country she would be freer of social demands and could devote herself to reading, painting and discovering nature.

Lieberman's first measure was to install fans in all the rooms of his residence. He then presented credentials to the government authorities. When the Benefactor received him in his office, the couple had spent only a few days in the city, but already the gossip that the ambassador's wife was very beautiful had reached the ears of the caudillo. By protocol, he invited them to a dinner, despite the fact that the diplomat's arrogant air and quackery were unbearable. On the appointed night Marcia Lieberman entered the Reception Room on her husband's arm and for the first time in her long career The Benefactor lost her breath to a woman. I had seen more beautiful faces and more slender carriage, but never so much grace. It awoke the memory of past conquests, stirring the blood with a heat that had not felt in many years. During that evening he stayed at a distance, observing the ambassador with dissimulation, seduced by the curve of the neck, the shadow of his eyes, the gestures of his hands, the seriousness of his attitude. Perhaps it crossed his mind that he was forty-some years older than her and that any scandal would have unsuspected repercussions beyond his borders, but that did not dissuade him, on the contrary, he added an irresistible ingredient to his nascent passion.

Marcia Lieberman felt the man's gaze on his skin, like an indecent caress, and he realized the danger, but he did not have the strength to escape. At one point she thought to ask her husband to leave, but instead she sat waiting for the old man to approach her and at the same time ready to run away if he did. I did not know why he was trembling. He had no illusions about him, from far away he could detail the signs of decrepitude, the skin marked by wrinkles and spots, the lean body, the wavering gait, he could imagine his stale smell and he guessed that under the white kid gloves his hands They were two claws. But the eyes of the dictator, clouded by age and the exercise of so many cruelties, still had a glow of dominance that paralyzed her in her chair.

The Benefactor did not know how to court a woman, he had not needed to do so until then. That acted in his favor, because if he had harassed Marcia with seductive gallantries it would have been repulsive and she would have recoiled with contempt. On the other hand she could not refuse when a few days later he appeared at her door,

dressed as a civilian and without an escort, like a sad great-grandfather, to tell him that he had not touched a woman for ten years and he was already dead for the temptations of that type, but with all respect asked him to accompany him that afternoon to a private place , where he could rest his head on his queen's knees and tell her what the world was like when he was still a well-planted male and she was not yet born.

-And my husband? Marcia asked with a whisper of her voice.

-Your husband does not exist, daughter. Now only. You and I exist, "the Life President replied, leading her by the arm to his black Packard. Marcia did not return home and within a month Ambassador Lieberman left for his country. He had removed stones in search of his wife, refusing at first to accept what was no longer a secret, but when the evidence of the rapture was impossible to ignore, Lieberman requested an audience with the Head of State and demanded the return of his wife . The interpreter tried to soften his words in the translation, but the President caught the tone and took advantage of the pretext to get rid of that reckless husband once and for all. He declared that Lieberman had insulted the Nation by launching those foolish accusations without any basis and ordered him to leave his borders in three days. He offered him the alternative of doing so without scandal, to protect the dignity of his country, since no one was interested in breaking diplomatic relations and obstructing the free traffic of oil tankers. At the

end of the interview, with an expression of offended father, he added that he could understand his obfuscation and that he should be calm, because in his absence the search for the lady would continue. To prove his good will he called the Chief of Police and gave him instructions in front of the ambassador. If at some point Lieberman thought of refusing to leave without Marcia, a second thought made him understand that he was exposed to a shot in the neck, so he packed his belongings and left the country before the designated period.

The Benefactor was taken by surprise by love at an age when he no longer remembered the impatience of the heart. That cataclysm shook his senses and placed him back in adolescence, but it was not enough to numb his fox cunning. He understood that it was a senile passion and it was impossible for him to imagine that Marcia rewarded his feelings. He did not know why he had followed her that afternoon, but his reason told him it was not for love and, since he knew nothing about women, he supposed that she had let herself be seduced by the taste of adventure or the greed of power. In reality, pity overcame her. When the old man embraced her anxiously, his eyes watering with humiliation because his virility did not respond as he once did, she stubbornly and with good will persisted in returning his pride. And so, after several attempts, the poor man managed to cross the threshold and walk for a few moments through the warm gardens offered, collapsing at once with a heart full of foam.

"Stay with me," the Benefactor asked, barely managing to overcome the fear of succumbing to her. And Marcia stayed because she was moved by the loneliness of the old caudillo and because the alternative of returning where her husband found it less interesting than the challenge of going through the iron fence behind which that man had lived for almost eighty years. The Benefactor kept Marcia hidden in one of his properties, where he visited her daily. He never stayed overnight with her. The time together passed in slow charms and conversations. In her faltering Spanish, she told him about her trips and the books she read, he listened to her without understanding much, but pleased with the cadence of her voice. Other times he referred to his childhood in the drylands of the Andes or his times as a soldier, but if she asked him a question, he immediately closed it, observing her out of the corner of his eye, like an enemy. Marcia noticed that unshakable doubt and understood that her habit of distrust was much more powerful than the need to abandon herself to tenderness, and after a few weeks she resigned herself to her defeat. By giving up hope of winning him for love, he lost interest in that man, and then he wanted to get out of the walls where she was kidnapped. But it was already late. The Benefactor needed her by his side because it was the closest thing to a companion he had known, her husband had returned to Europe and she had no place in this land, even his name was beginning to fade from the memory of others. The dictator perceived the change in her and her distrust increased, but she did not stop loving her for that. To console her from the confinement to which she was forever condemned, because her appearance on the street would confirm Lieberman's accusations and international relations would go to hell, she procured all those things she liked, music, books, animals. Marcia spent hours in a world of her own, each day more detached from reality. When she stopped encouraging him, it was impossible for her to hug her again and her dates became peaceful afternoons of chocolate and biscuits. In her desire to please her, one day The Benefactor invited her to visit the Summer Palace, so that she could see up close the paradise of the Belgian naturalist, of whom she had read so much.

The train had not been used since the inaugural party, ten years before, and it was in ruins, so they made the trip by car, presided over by a caravan of guards and employees who departed a week in advance carrying everything necessary to return to the Palace the luxuries of the first day. The road was just a path defended from the vegetation by gangs of prisoners. In some stretches they had to resort to

machetes to clear the ferns and oxen to get the cars out of the mud, but none of that diminished Marcia's enthusiasm. I was dazzled by the landscape. She endured the humid heat and the mosquitoes as if she did not feel them, attentive to that nature that seemed to wrap her in a hug. She had the impression that she had been there before, perhaps in a dream or in another existence, that she belonged to that place, that until then she had been a foreigner in the world and that all the steps taken, including that of leaving her husband's house to follow an old man who was trembling, they had been marked by his instinct for the sole purpose of leading her there. Before seeing the Summer Palace, I already knew that this would be his last residence. When the building finally appeared among the foliage, lined with palm trees and glistening in the sun, Marcia sighed in relief, like a shipwrecked man when he saw his port of origin again.

Despite the frantic preparations to receive them, the mansion had an air of enchantment. Its Roman architecture, designed as the center of a geometric park and grandiose avenues, was submerged in the disorder of gluttonous vegetation. The torrid climate had altered the color of the materials, covering them with a premature patina, of the pool and the gardens nothing was visible. The hunting greyhounds had broken their belts long ago and roamed the property's borders, a hungry and ferocious pack that welcomed the newcomers with a barking chorus. The birds had nested on the capitals and covered with excrement the reliefs. Everywhere there were signs of disorder. The Summer Palace had been transformed into a living creature, open to the green invasion of the jungle that had enveloped and penetrated him. Marcia jumped out of the car and ran to the large doors, where the escort was waiting, overwhelmed by the heat. He went through all the rooms one by one, the great halls decorated with crystal chandeliers that hung from the ceilings like clusters of stars and French furniture in whose tapestries they nested the lizards, the bedrooms with their baldachin beds faded by the intensity of the light, the bathrooms where the moss was insinuated in the joints of the marbles. He was smiling, with the attitude of someone recovering something that has been taken from him.

During the following days the Benefactor saw Marcia so pleased, that some vigor warmed her tired bones again and she could embrace her as in the first encounters. She accepted it distractedly. The week they planned to spend there lasted two, because the man felt very comfortable. The fatigue accumulated in his satrap years disappeared and several of his ailments as an old man diminished. He walked with Marcia around, pointing out the many varieties of orchids that climbed the trunks or hung like grapes from the highest branches, the clouds of white butterflies that covered the ground and the birds of iridescent feathers that filled the air with their voices. He played with her like a young lover, fed her in the mouth the delicious pulp of the wild mangoes, bathed her with his own hands in herbal infusions and made her laugh with a serenade under her window. He had not been away from the capital for years, except for brief trips in a small plane to the provinces where his presence was required to quell an outbreak of insurrection and return to the people the certainty that his authority was unquestionable. Those unexpected vacations put him in a very good mood, life seemed suddenly kinder and he had the fantasy that together with that beautiful woman he could continue to rule eternally. One night he was surprised by the dream in her arms. He awoke in the morning terrified, with the feeling of betraying himself. She got up sweating, heart racing, and watched her on the bed, white odalisque at rest, copper hair covering her face. He went out to give orders to his escort for the return to the city. He was not surprised that Marcia did not show signs of accompanying him. Maybe he really preferred it that way, because he understood that she represented his most dangerous weakness, the only one that could make him forget power.

The Benefactor left for the capital without Marcia. He left her half a dozen soldiers to guard the property and some employees for her service, and promised her that she would keep the road in good condition, so that she would receive her gifts, supplies, mail, and some newspapers. He said he would visit her often, as much as his duties as Head of State would allow, but when they said goodbye they both knew that they would never meet again. The Benefactor's caravan was lost behind the ferns and for a moment silence surrounded the Summer Palace. Marcia felt truly free for the first time in her existence. She took off the pins that held her hair in a bun and shook her head. The guards unbuttoned their jackets and stripped off their weapons, while the employees left to hang their hammocks in the coolest corners.

From the shadows the Indians had observed the visitors during those two weeks. Not being fooled by Marcia Lieberman's light skin and super crisp hair, they recognized her as one of them but did not dare to materialize in her presence because they had been underground for centuries. After the departure of the old man and his entourage, they returned stealthily to occupy the space where they had existed for generations. Marcia sensed that she was never alone, wherever she went, a thousand eyes followed her, around her there was a constant murmur, a warm breath, a rhythmic pulsation, but she did not fear, on the contrary, she felt protected by kind elves. He got used to small disturbances; one of her dresses disappeared for several days and suddenly she woke up in a basket at the foot of the bed, someone devoured her dinner shortly before she entered the dining room, stole her watercolors and her books, freshly cut orchids appeared on her table, some afternoon her bathtub waited for her with mint leaves floating in the fresh water, they listened to the notes of the pianos in the empty halls, the panting of lovers in the cupboards, the voices of children in the mezzanine. The employees had no explanation for these disorders and very soon she stopped asking them questions because she imagined that they were also part of that benevolent conspiracy. One night she waited, crouching with a flashlight between the curtains, and when she felt the pounding of feet on the marble, she turned on the light. He thought he saw naked figures, that for a moment they returned a meek look and then they vanished. He called them in Spanish, but nobody answered him. He understood that he would need immense patience to discover these mysteries, but he did not care, because he had the rest of his life ahead of him. Some years later the country was shaken with the news that the dictatorship had ended for a surprising cause: The Benefactor had died. Although he was already an old man reduced only to bones and skin and for months was rotting in his uniform, in reality very few imagined that man was mortal. Nobody remembered the time before him, he had been in power for so many decades that the people got used to consider it an inevitable evil, like the weather. The funeral echoes took a while to reach the Summer Palace. By then almost all the guards and servants, tired of waiting for a relief that never arrived, had deserted their posts. Marcia Lieberman listened to the new ones without getting upset. In fact, he had to make an effort to remember his past, what lay beyond the jungle, and that hawk-eyed old man who had upset his destiny. He realized that with the death of the tyrant would disappear the reasons to remain hidden, now he could return to civilization, where surely no one cared about the seizure of his abduction, but soon discarded that idea, because there was nothing out of that tangled region that interested him. His life passed peacefully among the Indians, immersed in that green nature, barely dressed in a tunic, short hair, adorned with tattoos and feathers. I was totally happy.

A generation later, when democracy had been established in the country and the long history of dictators was nothing but a trace in school books, someone remembered the marble villa and proposed to recover it to found an Academy of Art. The Congress of the Republic sent a commission to write a report, but the cars were lost along the way and when they finally reached San Jerónimo, nobody could tell them where the Summer Palace was. They tried to follow the railroad tracks, but they had been torn from the

sleepers and the vegetation had erased their tracks. The Congress then sent a detachment of explorers and a couple of military engineers who flew over the area by helicopter, but the vegetation was so thick that they could not find the place either. The traces of the Palace were confused in the memory of the people and in the municipal archives, the notion of their existence became a gossip of comadres, the reports were swallowed by the bureaucracy and as the country had more urgent problems, the project of the Art Academy was postponed.

Now they have built a road that connects San Jerónimo with the rest of the country. The travelers say that sometimes, after a storm, when the air is humid and charged with electricity, a white marble palace suddenly appears next to the road, which for a few moments remains suspended at a certain height, like a mirage, and then disappears without noise.

AND OF CLAY WE ARE CREATED

They discovered the head of the girl peeking out of the quagmire, with her eyes open, calling without a voice. He had a First Communion name, Azucena. In that endless cemetery, where the smell of the dead attracted the most remote vultures and where the cries of the orphans and the cries of the wounded filled the air, that obstinate girl in living became the symbol of tragedy. Both cameras transmitted the unbearable vision of his head sprouting from the mud, like a black pumpkin, that nobody was left without knowing it or naming it. And whenever we saw her appear on the screen, there was Rolf Carlé, who came to the place attracted by the news, without suspecting that there he would find a piece of his past, lost thirty years ago.

First it was an underground sob that shook the cotton fields, curling them like a frothy wave. The geologists had installed their measuring machines weeks in advance and already knew that the mountain had awakened again. For a long time they had predicted that the heat of the eruption could release the eternal ice from the slopes of the volcano, but nobody paid attention to these warnings, because they sounded like old women. The people of the valley continued their existence deaf to the moans of the earth, until the night of that fateful November of November, when a long roar announced the end of the world and the walls of snow fell off, rolling in an avalanche of mud, stones and water that fell on the villages, burying them under unfathomable meters of telluric vomit. As soon as they were able to shake off the paralysis of the first horror, the survivors found that the houses, the squares, the churches, the white cotton plantations, the somber forests of the coffee and the pastures of the bulls had disappeared. Much later, when the volunteers and soldiers arrived to rescue the living and to take account of the magnitude of the cataclysm, they calculated that under the mud there were more than twenty thousand human beings and an imprecise number of beasts, rotting in a viscous broth. The forests and rivers had also been defeated, and there was nothing left but an immense desert of mud.

When they called from the Canal at dawn, Rolf Carlé and I were together. I left the bed stunned with sleep and left to prepare coffee while he dressed in a hurry. He placed his work items in the green canvas bag that he always wore, and we said goodbye as many other times. I had no feeling. I stayed in the kitchen sipping my coffee and planning the hours without him, sure that the next day I would be back.

He was one of the first to arrive, because while other journalists were approaching the edges of the swamp in jeeps, on bicycles, on foot, each one making his way as best he could, he counted on the television helicopter and could fly over the avalanche. . On the screens appeared the scenes captured by the camera of his assistant, where he was submerged to the knees, with a microphone in his hand, in the middle of an uproar of lost children, mutilated, corpses and ruins. The story came to us with his quiet voice. For years I had seen him in the news, digging in battles and catastrophes, without anything stopping him, with reckless perseverance, and I was always amazed by his calm attitude to danger and suffering, as if nothing could shake his strength or divert your curiosity Fear did not seem to touch him, but he had confessed to me that he was not a brave man, far from it. I think the lens of the machine had a strange effect on him, as if it were transported to another time, from which he could see the events without really participating in them.

Upon knowing him more, I understood that this fictional distance kept him safe from his own emotions.

Rolf Carlé was from the beginning with Azucena. She filmed the volunteers who discovered her and the first ones who tried to approach her, her camera focused insistently on the girl, her dark face, her big desolate eyes, the compact tangle of her hair. In that place the mud was dense and there was danger of

sinking when treading. They threw a rope at her, which she did not make any effort to grab, until they shouted at her to take her, then she pulled out a hand and tried to move, but then she submerged more. Rolf released his bag and the rest of his equipment and advanced into the swamp, commenting for his assistant's microphone that it was cold and that the pestilence of the corpses was already beginning.

-What is your name? he asked the girl and she answered him with her flower name. Do not move, Azucena, "ordered Rolf Carlé, and went on talking to him without thinking what he was saying, only to distract her, while crawling slowly with mud up to his waist. The air around him seemed as muddy as mud.

On that side it was not possible to get close, so he backed off and went around where the terrain seemed firmer. When at last he was near he took the rope and tied it under his arms, so that they could lift it. He smiled at her with that smile that narrows his eyes and returns him to childhood, told him that everything was fine, he was with her, they would immediately take her out. He motioned for the others to pull, but as soon as the rope was tightened the girl shouted. They tried again and her shoulders and arms appeared, but they could not move her anymore, she was stuck. Someone suggested that perhaps her legs were compressed in the ruins of her house, and she said that they were not just rubble, she was also held by the bodies of her brothers, clinging to her. "Do not worry, let's get you out of here," Rolf promised. In spite of the transmission failures, I noticed that his voice was breaking and I felt so much closer to him because of that. She looked at him without answering.

In the first hours Rolf Carlé exhausted all the resources of his ingenuity to rescue her. He fought with sticks and ropes, but each *tirón* was an intolerable torment for the prisoner. It occurred to him to make a lever with sticks, but that did not work and he had to abandon that idea too. He got a couple of soldiers who worked with him for a while, but then they left him alone, because many other victims demanded help. The girl could not move and could barely breathe, but she did not seem desperate, as if an ancestral resignation allowed her to read her destiny. The journalist, on the other hand, was determined to snatch her to death. They brought her a tire, which she placed under her arms like a life preserver, and then crossed a board near the hole to support herself and thus reach it better. As it was impossible to remove the debris blindly, he submerged a couple of times to explore that hell, but he left exasperated, covered in mud, spitting stones. He deduced that a pump was needed to extract the water and sent to request it by radio, but they returned with the message that there was no transport and they could not send it until the next morning.

-We can not wait that long! said Rolf Carlé, but in that hurry no one stopped to pity him. There would still be many more hours before he accepted that time had stagnated and that reality had suffered an irremediable distortion. A military doctor came to examine the children and said that his heart worked well and that if he did not get too cold he could resist that night. "Be patient, Azucena, tomorrow they will bring the bomb," Rolf Carlé tried to console her. "Do not leave me alone," she asked him. -Of course not. They brought coffee and he gave it to the girl, sip by sip. The warm liquid encouraged her and she began to talk about her little life, about her family and school, about what that piece of world was like before the volcano burst. He was thirteen years old and had never left the limits of his village. The journalist, supported by a premature optimism, was convinced that everything would end bien would arrive the bomb, extract the water, remove the debris and Azucena would be transferred by helicopter to a hospital, where he would recover quickly and where he could visit with gifts. She thought that she was not old enough for dolls and did not know what she would like, maybe a dress. I do not understand much about women, he concluded with amusement, calculating that he had had many in his life, but none had taught him those details. To deceive the hours began to tell him his travels and his adventures as a hunter of

news, and when he ran out of memories he used his imagination to invent anything that could distract her. At times she was dozing, but he kept talking to her in the dark, to show her that he had not left and to overcome the harassment of uncertainty. That was a long night many miles away, I watched Rolf Carlé and the girl on a screen. I did not resist the wait in the house and went to the National Television, where many times I spent whole nights with him editing programs. So I was close to him and I could see what he experienced in those three final days. I went to all the important people in the city, to the senators of the Republic, to the generals of the Armed Forces, to the American ambassador and to the president of the Petroleum Company, begging them for a bomb to extract the mud, but I only got vague promises I started asking urgently on radio and television, to see if anyone could help us. Between calls, he would run to the reception center to avoid losing satellite images, which arrived at all times with new details of the catastrophe. While the journalists selected the scenes with the most impact for the news, I looked for those where Azucena's well appeared. The screen reduced the disaster to a single plane and accentuated the tremendous distance that separated me from Rolf Carlé, however I was with him, each suffering of the girl hurt me like him, I felt his same frustration, his own helplessness. Given the impossibility of communicating with him, I came up with the fantastic resource of concentrating to reach him with the force of thought and thus encourage him. At times I was stunned in a frantic and useless activity, at times pity overwhelmed me and I started to cry, and other times the fatigue overcame me and I thought I was looking through a telescope at the light of a dead star a million years ago.

In the first morning newscast I saw that hell, where corpses of men and animals floated by the waters of new rivers floated, formed in a single night by the melting snow. From the mud stood the tops of some trees and the bell tower of a church, where several people had found shelter and were waiting patiently for the rescue teams. Hundreds of Civil Defense soldiers and volunteers were trying to remove debris in search of the survivors, while long lines of ragged specters waited their turn for a bowl of broth. Radio stations reported that their phones were congested by calls from families offering shelter to orphaned children. There was little water to drink, gasoline and food. The doctors, resigned to amputate members without anesthesia, claimed at least sera, analgesics and antibiotics, but most of the roads were interrupted and the bureaucracy also delayed everything. Meanwhile, the mud contaminated by decomposing corpses threatened the living with plague. Azucena trembled on the tire that supported her on the surface. The immobility and tension had weakened her a lot, but she remained conscious and still spoke in a perceptible voice when a microphone was brought to her. His tone was humble, as if he were asking for forgiveness for causing so much discomfort. Rolf Carlé had his beard grown and dark shadows under his eyes, he looked exhausted. Even at that enormous distance I could perceive the quality of that fatigue, different from all the previous fatigues of his life. I had completely forgotten the camera, I could no longer look at the girl through a lens. The images that came to us were not from his assistant, but from other journalists who had taken over Azucena, attributing to him the pathetic responsibility of embodying the horror of what happened in that place. From the dawn Rolf struggled again to move the obstacles that held the girl in that grave, but she had only her hands, she did not dare to use a tool, because she could hurt her. He gave Azucena the cup of corn and banana porridge that the Army distributed, but she vomited it immediately. A doctor came and found that she was feverish, but said that there was not much to do, the antibiotics were reserved for cases of gangrene. A priest also came to bless her and to hang a medal of the Virgin around her neck. In the afternoon a soft, persistent drizzle began to fall.

"The sky is crying," Azucena murmured and began to cry too. "Do not be scared," Rolf begged. You have to reserve your strength and keep calm, everything will be fine, I'm with you and I'll get you out of here in some way. The journalists came back to photograph her and ask her the same things that she

was no longer trying to answer. In the meantime, more television and film equipment arrived, rolls of cables, tapes, films, videos, precision lenses, recorders, sound consoles, lights, reflex screens, batteries and motors, boxes with spare parts, electricians, sound technicians and carnarógrafos, who sent Azucena's face to millions of screens around the world. And Rolf Carlé kept crying out for a bomb. The deployment of resources gave results and in the National Television we began to receive clearer images and clearer sounds, the distance seemed to shorten suddenly and I had the terrible feeling that Azucena and Rolf were beside me, separated from me by a glass irreducible. I could follow the events hour by hour, I knew how much my friend did to pluck the girl from her prison and to help her endure her ordeal, I heard fragments of what they talked about and the rest I could guess, I was present when she taught Rolf pray and when he distracted her with the stories that I have told him in a thousand and one nights under the white mosquito net of our bed. When darkness fell on the second day he tried to make her sleep with the old Austrian songs learned from her mother, but she was beyond the dream. They spent much of the night talking, both exhausted, hungry, shaken by the cold. And then, little by little, the firm floodgates that had kept Rolf Carlé's past for many years collapsed, and the torrent of what he had hidden in the deepest and most secret layers of memory finally came out, dragging the obstacles that had blocked his consciousness for so long. Not everything could tell Azucena, she maybe did not know that there was a world beyond the sea before her time, she was unable to imagine Europe at the time of the war, so she did not tell him about the defeat or the afternoon in which the Russians took him to the concentration camp to bury the starving prisoners. Why explain that the naked bodies, stacked like a mountain of logs, looked like brittle china? How to tell the dying girl about the ovens and the gallows? He also did not mention the night he saw his mother naked, wearing red shoes with stiletto heels, crying with humiliation. Many things fell silent, but in those

For the first time, he relived all that his mind had tried to erase.

Azucena gave him her fear and thus, unwittingly, forced Rolf to meet his. There, next to that damn pit, it was impossible for Rolf to keep fleeing from himself and the visceral terror that marked his childhood assaulted him by surprise. She retreated to the age of Azucena and further back, and found herself trapped in a pit with no way out, buried in life, her head at ground level, saw together her face the boots and legs of her father, who had removed the strap from his waist and waved it in the air with an unforgettable hiss of furious viper. Pain invaded him, intact and precise, as he had always been crouching in his mind. He returned to the closet where his father put him under lock and key to punish him for imaginary faults and there he stayed for hours with his eyes closed so as not to see the darkness, his ears covered with his hands so as not to hear the beating of his own heart, trembling, shrunken as an animal. In the haze of memories he found his sister Katharina, a sweet, retarded creature who passed the hidden existence with the hope that the father would forget the misfortune of his birth. She crawled next to her under the dining table and there, hidden behind a long white tablecloth, the two children remained embraced, attentive to the footsteps and the voices. The smell of Katharina came mixed with the one of its own sweat, with the aromas of the kitchen, garlic, soup, bread freshly baked and with a strange stink of rotten mud. His sister's hand in his, his scared gasp, the brush of his wild hair on his cheeks, the candid look on his face. Katharina, Katharina ... appeared before him floating like a flag, wrapped in the white cloth-turned into a shroud, and could finally mourn his death and the guilt of having abandoned her. He understood then that his exploits as a journalist, those that had given him so many fame and recognition, were just an attempt to keep his oldest fear under control, by means of the trick of taking refuge behind a lens to see if the reality was more important to him. tolerable. He faced excessive risks as an exercise in

courage, training during the day to defeat the monsters that tormented him at night. But the moment of truth had come and he could no longer escape from his past. He was Azucena, he was buried in the mud, his terror was not the remote emotion of a childhood almost forgotten, it was a claw in the throat. In the flush of tears his mother appeared to him, dressed in gray and with her crocodile skin wallet pressed to her lap, as he had last seen her on the dock, when he went to see him off to the ship on which he embarked. for America. He did not come to dry his tears, but to tell him-to take a shovel, because the war was over and now they had to bury the dead.

-Do not Cry. I do not hurt anymore, I'm fine, "Azucena said at dawn. "I do not cry for you, I cry for me, it hurts everything" Rolf Carlé smiled. In the valley of the cataclysm the third day began with a pale light among the clouds. The President of the Republic moved to the area and appeared in a campaign suit to confirm that it was the worst misfortune of this century, the country was mourning, the sister nations had offered help, a state of siege was ordered, the Forces Armed they would be inclement, they would shoot without procedures anyone caught stealing or committing other misdeeds. He added that it was impossible to remove all the corpses or account for the thousands of disappeared, so that the entire valley was declared a cemetery and the bishops would come to celebrate a solemn mass for the souls of the victims. He went to the army tents, where the rescued were piled up, to give them the relief of uncertain promises, and to the improvised hospital, to give a word of encouragement to the doctors and nurses, exhausted by so many hours of hardship. Immediately he was led to the place where Azucena was, who by then was already famous, because his image had given the

return to the planet. He greeted her with his languid hand of statesman and the microphones recorded his voice moved and his fatherly accent, when he told him that his courage was an example for the country. Rolf Carlé interrupted him to ask for a bomb and he assured him that he would take care of the matter in person. I caught sight of Rolf for a moment, squatting by the well. In the afternoon newscast he was in the same position: and I, looking at the screen like a fortune teller before his crystal ball, I perceived that something fundamental had changed in him, I guessed that during the night his defenses had collapsed and he He had given in to the pain, finally vulnerable. That girl touched a part of her soul that he himself had not had access to and that he never shared with me. Rolf wanted to comfort her and it was Azucena who comforted him.

I realized the precise moment when Rolf stopped fighting and abandoned himself to the torment of watching the agony of the girl. I was with them, three days and two nights, spying them on the other side of life. I was there when she told him that in his thirteen years a boy had never loved her and it was a pity to leave this world without knowing love, and he assured her that he loved her more than he could ever love anyone, more that his mother and his sister, more than all the women who had slept in his arms, more than me, his partner, who would give anything to be trapped in that well instead, that he would change his life for that of she, and I saw when he leaned over his poor head and kissed her on the forehead, overwhelmed by a sweet and sad feeling that he could not name. I felt how at that moment both of them were saved from despair, they fell off the mud, they rose above the vultures and the helicopters, they flew together on that vast swamp of rottenness and laments. And finally they could accept death. Rolf Carlé prayed silently that she would die soon, because it was no longer possible to endure so much pain. By then I had gotten a bomb and was in contact with a general willing to send her in the early morning of the next day in a military plane. But on the evening of that third day, under the implacable quartz lamps and the lenses of a hundred machines, Azucena surrendered, her eyes lost in those of that friend who had held her until the end. Rolf Carlé took the life jacket off, closed his eyelids, held it tight against his chest for a few minutes, then let go. She sank slowly, a flower in the mud.

You're back with me, but you're not the same man anymore. I often accompany you to the Canal and we see Azucena's videos again, you study them carefully, looking for something you could have done to save her and it did not occur to you in time. Or maybe you examine them to see you like in a mirror, naked. Your cameras are abandoned in a closet, you do not write or sing, you stay for hours sitting at the window looking at the mountains. By your side, I hope you complete the journey into yourself and you heal yourself of the old wounds. I know that when you return from your nightmares we will walk again hand in hand, as before.